

JOY KATZMARZIK

Comic Art and Avant-Garde

Bill Watterson's
Calvin and Hobbes

and the Art of American
Newspaper Comic Strips

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

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1 INTRODUCTION

True, comics are a popular art, and yes, I believe their primary obligation is to entertain, but comics can go beyond that, and when they do, they move from silliness to significance. . . . The idea that comics are potentially one of the most versatile artforms is sadly foreign. Our expectations and demands for comics are not high. ("Cheapening" 95)

With these words, Bill Watterson, the artist of the newspaper comic strip series *Calvin and Hobbes*, summarized the potential of comic strips in his speech "The Cheapening of the Comics," delivered at the Festival of Cartoon Art at Ohio State University in October 1989. As he pointed out, newspaper comic strips find themselves in the dichotomy of being entertainment and an art form at once. In a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, Watterson pokes fun at the arbitrariness of the categories of high art and low art by making Calvin claim that a drawing of "a cartoon of a painting of a comic strip" is "sophomoric. Intellectually sterile. ... 'Low' art" (Cat 152). When Hobbes asks, "Suppose I draw a cartoon of a painting of a comic strip?" Calvin replies: "Sophomoric. Intellectually sterile. ... 'Low' art." In the *Tenth Anniversary* album, Watterson self-ironically comments on the strip: "I would suggest that it's not the medium, but the quality of perception and expression, that determines the significance of art. But what would a cartoonist know?" (*Tenth* 202) The last sentence reveals Watterson's frustration over the poor reputation of newspaper comic artists and their art form.

This study focuses on newspaper comic strips as an avant-garde art form, and questions the label of "low art" that is attached to them due to their intersection with the entertainment industry. With the "pictorial turn," described by W.J.T. Mitchell as the "rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality," academia has increasingly turned toward the studies of visual culture – and yet, newspaper comic strips have remained inexplicably untouched (Mitchell 16). However, newspaper comic series have turned into cultural knowledge: They reached, and despite the decline of print newspapers, still reach millions of enthusias-

tic readers across all social and demographic boundaries, worldwide they attract a culturally diverse readership. Readers from around the globe are familiar with the melancholic world of *Peanuts*, the ludicrous behavior of the pets in *Garfield*, the absurdities of the *Far Side*, and the light humor and yet deep philosophy of *Calvin and Hobbes*, just to name a few. The series reach a broad audience other artists can only dream of. Moreover, they paved the way for the emergence of comic books and graphic novels which impact today's literary world. Therefore, it is worth taking a serious look at the "funnies," and to examine in how far comic strips can exceed the simple gag-a-day mechanism and move from "silliness to significance," as Watterson claimed. This move is what makes his series avant-garde: Newspaper comic strips are not only an art form that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and employs particular modern narrative techniques, thus being anchored in the historical framework of modernism. In a broader sense of the term, *Calvin and Hobbes* is avant-garde, as Watterson is a pioneer among his contemporaries in finding innovative and new means to use the medium to humorously parodize society, life, trends, and human mannerisms (cf. Hölzle 10). Like the avant-garde, newspaper comic strips are an experimental art form rooted in real life.

Newspaper comic strips are a complex art form as there are multiple concomitants accompanying the art. They are not only an art form published in newspapers and thus dependent on an entirely different carrier medium, but they also have a unique publication process as they are distributed by syndicates who play a pivotal role as a mediator between the artist and the customer. Often enough, the artist has little to say in the business process, and from the seventies on, it has become increasingly popular to use comic strip characters for merchandizing purposes. *Peanuts*, for instance, sells insurances, as can be still seen in a 2014 commercial by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company designed for the Super Bowl ("MetLife"). Whole businesses have grown around comic strip series with several artists to draw and letter the series, yet due to severe restrictions in space, the comic strips are often reduced to a few speaking heads and a mediocre punch line. The humoristic quality of comic strips allows them to easily be dismissed as light entertainment. However, newspaper comic strips can go beyond light entertainment and commerce – they can address serious issues, to an extent that they can even become political. Norman Solomon wrote an entire book, *The*

Trouble with Dilbert: How Corporate Culture Gets the Last Laugh (1997), in which he criticizes Scott Adams for the underlying message in his comic strip *Dilbert* that his sympathy for the worker would ultimately serve corporate America. The fact that Solomon dedicated a whole book to Dilbert shows that Solomon regards a comic strip series as a serious political instrument. And yet, comic strips often fly under the radar in the academic discourse and remain neglected.

This thesis sets out to disentangle the interdependence of commerce, humor, and art in newspaper comic strips. For this purpose, Bill Watterson and his comic strip series *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985-1995) serves as an appropriate case study: The series was not only among the most successful series when it was published, but still is considered to be one of the most successful series today. Among other awards, Bill Watterson won the Reuben Award as Cartoonist of the Year twice (1986, 1988), and in 2014, 19 years after he finished *Calvin and Hobbes*, he was awarded the Grand Prix at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in France. But there is more to his series than mere success: Bill Watterson never treated comic strips as a business, but as a serious art form that – like any other art form – is capable of expressing truth, of shedding light on the *conditio humana*. As such he forbade the licensing of his characters despite heavy and long-lasting arguments with his syndicate, Universal Press Syndicate (today: Uclick). By 1990, he had withdrawn from public life to focus on creating his art until he stopped *Calvin and Hobbes* in 1995, despite heavy protests by the readership. Despite unbroken interest in the series, the artist behind the work remains a mystery until today. He neither played to the gallery, nor was he interested in fame – he only cared about his art as a vehicle to comment on the human condition. His declining of any offers by companies and even film studios to merchandize his characters or to turn them into film makes him and his art all the more credible.

In her work *Writing Genre*, Amy L. Devitt carves out four approaches to studying genre in general, which lend this thesis its basic structure: The “study of genre in context” deals with the genre question (ch. 1), the impact of the unique publication process, and examines the function of newspaper comics (ch. 2). The “history of genres” locates *Calvin and Hobbes* in the short history of newspaper comic strips and the discourse that accompanies the genre (ch. 3). The “creative boundaries” serve to develop a toolbox of the graphic and narrative techniques

newspaper comic strips employ to convey their message, as well as the unique use of humor, and how Watterson applies these techniques in *Calvin and Hobbes* (ch. 4). This toolbox offers and enables a systematic interpretative approach to the genre. The analysis of the “social setting,” “the genre’s relationship to the particular social structures and groups in which it reciprocally interacts” as she says (Devitt 33), turns to the content of the series and exhibits how the series, rooted in the eighties and nineties, discusses and humorously parodies social, cultural, and political issues (ch. 5).

This fivefold approach to newspaper comic strips offers an insight into the genre that requires highest creativity. It shows its strength and its constraints, and discusses the capabilities of the genre. Although this thesis does not include an immediate comparison of comics and film, it partially sets out to respond to Gilbert Seldes’s request, who wrote in his work *The 7 Lively Arts*, published in 1924,

Most of the comics have also appeared in the movies; the two things have much in common and some day a thesis for the doctorate will be written to establish the relationship. The writer of that thesis will explain, I hope, why “movies” is a good word and “funnies,” as offensive little children name the comic pages, is what charming essayists call an *atrocious vocable*. (Seldes 196)

To respond at least to the second of Seldes’s requests, this thesis argues to what extent newspaper comic strips can do much better than just being funny and should be taken seriously.

1.1 The Current State of Research

We have tended to equate gravity with importance. The highest accolade we give to a humorist is when we say that even so he is a ‘serious’ writer – which is to say that although he makes us laugh, his ultimate objective is to say something more about the human condition than merely that it is amusing. This implies that comedy is ‘un-serious’ – we thus play a verbal trick, for we use ‘serious’ to mean both ‘important’ and ‘without humor,’ when the truth is that there is no reason at all why something cannot be at once very important and very comic. (Rubin 4)

Humor is one important feature of human community: Smiling at other people or making them laugh creates a sense of community. As Louis D. Rubin points out, humor does not make a piece of art less serious and less important; humor is a serious matter. It is even serious to the extent that the Stanford Graduate School of Business offers a class on "Humor: Serious Business" to teach future leaders how to develop an adequate sense of humor ("Humor: Serious Business"). Among other humorous art forms, newspaper comic strips are a strange player in the field, not at least because they are not self-contained but depend on their carrier medium of newspapers. As a hybrid art form consisting of image and text published in a different medium that works according to different rules, newspaper comic strips are an interdisciplinary medium, and accordingly they have encountered research from different angles. Especially with the rise of pop art and the success of Roy Lichtenstein's oversized comic art works in the sixties, comics and their cultural impact shifted into the focus of scholars.

They have been studied from the viewpoint of socio-scientific studies, as done by Leo Bogart in his work *The Age of Television* (1956). In *Waiting for the End* (1965), Leslie Fiedler, who famously called for a bridge between high and low culture ("Cross the Border – Close the Gap" is the title of another famous essay published in 1972) writes about the alleged end of the novel and how it is widely assumed that the novel is the "last narrative art-form invented. . . . Beyond it, we sense, lie only those forms to which we who read cannot help condescending a little: comic books, movies, television, etc." (Fiedler 172). However, he argues how, compared to an eighteenth century viewpoint of writing epics in verse, "the novel seemed already anti-literature, even post-literature; that is, it appeared then precisely what we take television or comic books to be now" (173-74).

Comics have also been studied from the angle of media studies, e.g. Marshall McLuhan's work *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* published in 1964, in which he argues how the media itself is not any more the vehicle for a message, but how modern media becomes the message itself (McLuhan 9). But also pedagogical studies have approached comics, such as Alfred Clemens Baumgärtner's *Die Welt der Comics: Probleme einer primitiven Literaturform* (1971). The title itself reveals the problem of Baumgärtner's approach: He regards comics as a degenerate form of literature and not as an art form in its own right. At

times, newspaper comics have also been entirely neglected, compared to graphic novels. Despite Will Eisner's claim in his work *Comics and Sequential Art* that he includes newspaper comics in his study, they only have a marginal appearance in the book. However, regarding the genre from one particular angle does not do the comic strips justice and makes a study of the genre as such inevitable. This step was first taken by David Manning White and Robert H. Abel, who published a collection of essays on *The Funnies: An American Idiom* in 1963, in which multiple components of the comics are discussed, such as the role of the readership, the function of children protagonists or the question whether comics are an art form or not. White and Abel do not hesitate to present also controversial positions, such as Karl E. Fortress's short essay, "The Comics as Non-Art," in which he argues why comics are not an art form.

And yet, an approach to newspaper comic strips as such still mostly taken through one lens: a comprehensive historical approach is David Kunzle's two-volume work *The Early Comic Strip* (volume one, *Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*, published in 1973, and volume two, *The Nineteenth Century*, published in 1990). He extends the historical scope of newspaper comics by starting with the artistic precursors, namely political and religious propaganda. It is a broad work, in which the third part is primarily dedicated to British artist William Hogarth and his influence on newspaper comic strips, thus placing newspaper comics in line with fine art history. Interestingly, the long time period between the publication of the first and the second volume reveals how the perception of newspaper comics has (not) changed. In his first volume, Kunzle attempts to provide a normative and universal definition of newspaper comic strips by specifying four conditions for a comic strip "of any period, in any country" (Kunzle 2). In the second volume, *The Nineteenth Century*, published nearly twenty years later, he admits: "The comic strip, however (which is certainly a distinct – perhaps distinguished – genre, if not Art), is déclassé . . ." (xix). This reveals how the reputation of comic strips did not change since the publication of his first volume in 1973. While in the seventies and the eighties graphic novels and comic books gained immense repute, newspaper comic strips could not partake in that success, and Kunzle admits that "[a]s a respectable academic, I have, I sup-

pose, sought to give the comic strip academic respectability. I doubt that I have succeeded yet" (*Nineteenth* xix).

M. Thomas Inge is the editor of the *Handbook of American Popular Culture* (vol. 1: published in 1978, vol. 2: 1980, vol. 3: 1981) that strives to do more justice to comic strips and their context in popular culture. Each chapter is devoted to a different discipline of popular culture, such as animation, film, radio, television, or comic strips. In the preface to the first volume in 1978, Inge writes that the handbook seeks to

... recognize that each form or medium of expression has its own aesthetic principles, techniques, and ways of conveying ideas. Each has been subject to misuse and ineptitude, but each has also witnessed levels of artistic accomplishment remarkable by any standards, although finally each form must be evaluated within and by its own self-generated set of standards and objectives. (Preface x)

Inge's decision to regard and treat each discipline as an art form in its own right drew attention to comic strips also in an academic surrounding. He approached newspaper comic strips as a phenomenon of modern pop culture, and not so much, as Kunzle argues, a genre that gains its legitimization as a branch of art history, a field already established as an acclaimed field of research.

Last but not least, its humoristic character also locates comics (as the name itself already indicates) near the field of humor studies. Thus it seems natural that scholars tend to look at newspaper comics through the lens of its neighboring discipline. The broad variety of approaches reveals the challenges that arise when dealing with newspaper comic strips: It is a humorous genre, a mass medium, a popular art form – and moreover, it is a hybrid medium that is neither fully text nor fully a visual medium.

In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the genre, the comic strip series *Calvin and Hobbes* serves not only as a lens through which to look at that interdisciplinary art form, but also as a qualitative benchmark as to what the art form can bring forth despite all the confinements placed upon the artist. The next chapter thus introduces the artist, as well as the cast and the basic dynamics of *Calvin and Hobbes*.

1.2 “Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year”: Bill Watterson and Calvin and Hobbes

William B. Watterson II, better known as Bill Watterson, is the author of *Calvin and Hobbes* that ran in more than 2,400 newspapers from 1985-1995. Colleagues, critics and the audience repeatedly regarded his work as an outstanding high-quality corpus of art that pushed the limits of the art form.

Born in 1958 in Washington D.C., Bill Watterson grew up in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and attended Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, where he majored in Politics. He had always liked cartooning, and both during high school and at Kenyon College, he drew cartoons for student magazines. However, he also had a passion for art in general, and in a speech he gave at Kenyon College, he admitted how he and a few friends built a scaffold that enabled him to copy Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam” onto the ceiling of his dorm room (“Some Thoughts”). When Watterson graduated in 1980, he had to paint over his Sistine Chapel painting in his dorm room and landed his first job as a political cartoonist for *The Cincinnati Post*. However, as the editor seemed to have “something specific in mind that he was looking for” that Watterson was not able to deliver, he came to dislike political cartoons (Interview Christie 28). He describes his Cincinnati days as “pretty Kafkaesque,” and as a time when “I pretty much prostituted myself for six months but I couldn’t please him [the editor], so he sent me packing” (Interview Christie 28). After that disappointment in political cartooning, he began to write applications to syndicates to focus on drawing fictional comic strips. Without any further knowledge in cartooning, he kept inventing new characters, created new samples and sent them out to syndicates. For five years, from 1980-1985, his endeavors proved to be unsuccessful, until United Features Syndicate replied that they disliked the protagonists of his sample, but that he should try to work on the two side characters – a boy and his stuffed tiger. That is how Calvin and Hobbes were born. Ironically, United Features rejected the strip, but Watterson was taken under contract by Universal Press Syndicate (Interview Christie 29). The strip was first published in November 1985 and became an instant success.

Calvin and Hobbes ran in the newspapers from 1985-1995 with two one-year interruptions for sabbaticals in 1991 and 1994 (Watterson,

Introduction 14) in which the newspapers featured reruns of formerly published material. In 1995, Watterson decided to stop drawing the series as he felt that there was nothing left to say.

Along with the publication of the comic strips in the newspapers, *Calvin and Hobbes* was also republished in book format. All book compilations were million-sellers in the first year of their publication, and the total number of *Calvin and Hobbes* books in print is around 23 million ("Overview: Bill Watterson"). He won the Reuben Award from the National Cartoonists Society for "Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year" twice (1986 and 1988) and was nominated again in 1992. Watterson's entire collection comprises 14 comic book collections with a total of 3,150 comic strips (Maack; Martell 105), published not only in English, but also translated into around thirty other languages (Eriksson).¹ From 1987 on, Andrews and McMeel Publisher (from 1997 on: Andrews McMeel Publishing) published the following comic book collections accompanying the regular and daily publication process.

Each one of the three collections (*Essential*, *Authoritative*, and *Indispensable*) contain a watercolor comic at the beginning, printed only in the collections. In addition to the comic strip reprints, two publications only contain the longer and color-print Sunday comic strips: *The Calvin and Hobbes Lazy Sunday Book: A Collection of Sunday Calvin and Hobbes Cartoons* (1989), and an exhibition catalogue *Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages, 1985-1995* (2001, with an introduction by Bill Watterson) that accompanied the exhibition of Sunday pages at the Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio (today: the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum). *The Tenth Anniversary Book* was published in 1995 and contains a selection of comic strips with personal comments by Bill Watterson.

¹ Interestingly, the names of Calvin and Hobbes are not translated in every language as "Calvin" and "Hobbes." They appear as "Kalfin I Gopsyia" (Belarus), "Calvin e Haroldo" (Brasil), "Steen & Stoffer" (Denmark), "Lassi ja Leevi" (Finland), "Casper en Hobbes" (Netherlands), "Tommy of Tigern" (Norway), "Kelvin & Celsjusz" (Poland), or "Kolya I Hobbie" (Russia).

Publication	Title of Collection	Publication in Newspaper	Collections
1987	<i>Calvin and Hobbes (CnH')</i>	1985-1986	Published as <i>The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury</i> (1988)
1988	<i>Something under the Bed Is Drooling (Drooling)</i>	1986-1987	
1989	<i>Yukon Ho!</i>	1987-1988	Published as <i>The Authoritative Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury</i> (1990) (Author)
1990	<i>Weirdos from Another Planet!</i>	1988	
1991	<i>The Revenge of the Baby-Sat</i>	1988-1989	Published as <i>The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury</i> (1992) (Indis)
1991	<i>Scientific Progress Goes "Boink"</i>	1989-1990	
1992	<i>Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons (Killer)</i>	1990-1991	
1993	<i>The Days Are Just Packed (Packed)</i>	1991-1992	
1994	<i>Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat (Cat)</i>	1992-1993	
1996	<i>There's Treasure Everywhere (Treasure)</i>	1993-1995	
1996	<i>It's a Magical World (Magical)</i>	1995	

In 2005, ten years after Watterson stopped drawing the strip, Andrews McMeel Publishing decided to publish *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, a three-volume collection of the entire series (a cheaper paperback version appeared in 2012). Before the publication of *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, the customer had to buy eleven different-sized comic books in order to get hold of the entire archive. A final publication followed in 2013 when the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum held an exhibition on *Calvin and Hobbes* to “revisit and re-examine the strip and its place in the medium’s history” and published an accompanying exhibition catalogue (Robb vii).

The archive of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum holds the original *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips today, as Watterson donated his entire collection to the museum when he stopped drawing his strips in 1995. Situated right on campus, it is the world’s largest cartoon library. Next to Watterson’s collection, the library holds not only a comprehensive collection on comics in general, but also rare archive material on Bill Watterson such as newspaper articles, letters sent to Watterson, or rare magazine articles (Interview Robb 18).

Since Watterson withdrew from public life at an early stage of his career, little original material by him other than the comic books has been published. He gave a lengthy interview with *Honk!* Magazine in 1987 and an interview with his long-time friend Richard Samuel West, an expert on comics and cartoons and today’s co-owner of Periodyssey, a business that sells historical newspaper comics and cartoons. The interview was published in the *Comics Journal* in 1989.² In both interviews, he speaks about his career, creativity, the characters in *Calvin and Hobbes*, and his artistic influences. Watterson also gave two public speeches: “The Cheapening of the Comics” at the Festival of Cartoon Art at OSU on 27 October 1989, and “Some Thoughts on the Real World by One Who Glimpsed It and Fled” at his alma mater Kenyon College on 20 May 1990. Two final interviews published after he stopped painting are part of the 2005 collection and the exhibition catalogue (2015).³ As Watterson always wished to keep his privacy, no

² Watterson dedicated *The Lazy Sunday Pages* to Rich West.

³ There are a few lesser known notes by him, such as an introduction to a Krazy Kat collection “A Few Thoughts on Krazy Kat,” a tribute to Charles M. Schulz (“Drawn Into a Dark but Gentle World,” 1999), another shorter

photographs of him exist other than two from the eighties. Andrews McMeel Publishing offers brief background information on their website about Watterson and the comic strip (“About Bill Watterson”), but they explicitly state that Bill Watterson is not available for interviews (“Contacting Bill Watterson”).⁴

Since little is published on newspaper comic strips in the academic field in general, and little is known about Watterson, virtually no academic research exists on Watterson or on *Calvin and Hobbes*. In addition to the archives of the Cartoon Library in Columbus, multiple fan pages in the web of private collectors provide rare material. Tim Hulsizer’s website is the most comprehensive online archive (Hulsizer, *Magic on Paper*).⁵ In 2009, Nevin Martell published *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip* in which he originally set out to write a book about Watterson. Martell introduces himself as a passionate fan of *Calvin and Hobbes* who tries to come as close as possible to the mastermind behind the comic strip, but he never achieved reaching Watterson for an interview. Still, he created an insightful work by leading numerous interviews with Watterson’s friends, his family, and colleagues. In this compilation of numerous phone calls, email interviews, and visits, he nevertheless provides a deep and interesting insight into the people who influenced Bill Watterson. In 2013, the film *Dear Mr. Watterson*, directed by Joel Allen Schroeder, was released. Similar to Martell’s concern, Schroeder interviewed artists around Bill Watterson to create a comprehensive image of the artist and of the traces he left in the world of cartooning. A second film, *Stripped*, was also released in 2013, which offers a broader view on cartooning.

Concerning the comic strips of *Calvin and Hobbes* themselves, little research has been done. The only monograph dedicated to *Calvin and*

article on his artistic developments (“Issue No. 68”). In 2008, he wrote a foreword for *Cul de Sac: This Exit*, a comic strip collection by Richard Thompson, and in 2014, he conducted an interview with Richard Thompson on *Cul de Sac*.

⁴ As the website states that Watterson is not available for journalistic interviews, I contacted him for an academic interview in October 2015. However, I did not receive a reply.

⁵ Hulsizer’s collections also contain many rare items like watercolors or scans of illustrations published in magazines.

Hobbes is Marianne Krichel's study *Erzählerische Vermittlung im Comic am Beispiel des amerikanischen Zeitungscomics "Calvin and Hobbes"* (2006). In her dissertation, published in the series of Anglophone linguistics (Studien zur anglistischen Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft), she examines linguistic techniques in the comic strips. However, the focus of her dissertation is mainly a comparison of the linguistic techniques of comics to other artistic genres, namely prose and drama.⁶

As the comic strip series does not depend on a complex plot, but relies on the characters, the following chapter serves as an introduction to the basic dynamics of the series through an analysis of its main cast.

1.3 Calvin and Hobbes: An Introduction to the Cast and the Series

1.3.1 "I wouldn't want Calvin in my house": Calvin

In the entry for *Calvin and Hobbes* in the *Encyclopedia of American Comics: From 1897 to the Present*, Ron Goulart summarizes:

Watterson's abrupt mid-strip shifts from fantasy to reality, and from one character's viewpoint to another's as Hobbes alternates between dollhead and a highly kinetic personality, are breathtaking. The humor of the strip is one of character rather than of action or situation, and derives as much from the subtle interplay between the real and the imaginary as from the tension between the energetic child and his bewildered parents, teachers, and baby-sitters. (64)

Instead of overpopulating his comic strip, Watterson worked with a small set of characters: Besides the protagonists Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes, there are his parents, Susie, the girl who lives next door,

⁶ Marianne Krichel also published an article on the same topic. However, she focuses on using methods of different art genres and applying them to newspaper comics. Cf. Krichel: "Erzähltheorie und Comics: Am Beispiel von Zeitungscomics des *Herald Tribune*." One recent publication focuses on theology in *Calvin and Hobbes: Philosophieren über Gott und die Welt mit Calvin und Hobbes*, edited by Martin Blay and Michael Winkelmann (2018). The comics, however, serve as a springboard to enter theological debates.

the teacher Ms. Wormwood, Rosalyn the babysitter, and Moe, the bully at school. His uncle Max has a short appearance at the beginning of the series, but as he did not seem to add any narrative special features to the existing cast, Watterson made Uncle Max disappear (*Author* 118). Also, Watterson rather wanted to describe a small world, “or sort of the big world within the small world – so adding characters would start to alter all that” (Interview Robb 25). So he made the effort to create few side characters that do not function as add-ons, but are individual personalities.

Calvin is a 6-year old boy. In literature, children as protagonists often hold a special role by functioning as a socio-critical voice. Children or young adolescents on their way from childhood to adulthood are still unburdened by social constraints and are not yet subject to the strict hierarchies of adulthood. Thus, it is easier to criticize social constructs through the voice of children. Famous literary examples of adolescents as protagonists are, for instance, Huck Finn in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, or the children in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. In the same way, Calvin is exempt from certain social expectations. Thus Watterson can use Calvin as a voice to criticize American society more effectively than any adult could do.

Watterson originally intended to name the boy Marvin, but two years prior to the launching of *Calvin and Hobbes*, Tom Armstrong published a comic strip entitled *Marvin*. Therefore, Watterson changed the name into Calvin after sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin (*Tenth* 21). Although Calvin partially carries autobiographical features, Watterson says: “He is autobiographical in the sense that he thinks about the same issues that I do, but in this, Calvin reflects my adulthood more than my childhood. Many of Calvin’s struggles are metaphors for my own. . . . I use Calvin as an outlet for my immaturity” (*Tenth* 21). So, both Calvin and Hobbes are rather a transcript of Watterson’s mental diary rather than a copy of his childhood:

Their words and actions are fictitious, sometimes the opposite of what I would say or do, but their emotional centers are very true to the way I think. Hobbes got all my better qualities (and a few quirks from our cats), and Calvin got my ranting, escapist side. Together, they’re pretty much a transcript of my mental diary. I didn’t set out to do this, but that’s what came out, and frankly it’s pretty startling to reread these

strips and see my personality exposed so plainly right there on paper. I meant to disguise that better. (Introduction 13)

Watterson used *Calvin and Hobbes* as a vehicle to discuss topics he was concerned with, but from a different angle, through the eyes of a pert child who has no inhibition threshold.

Marianne Krichel describes Calvin as a boy stuck in the “socializing process” because he has no regard for others and is fearless of the consequences (*Erzählerische Vermittlung* 91). That makes him a short-sighted and obnoxious character as he is the six-year old child who sees the present moment rather than the long-term consequences of his behavior. Watterson admits that he would not want Calvin to be in his house (*Tenth* 21). Watterson says, “The socialization that we all go through to become adults teaches you not to say certain things because you later suffer the consequences. Calvin doesn’t know that rule of thumb yet” (Interview West 64). That makes him live “entirely in the present, and whatever he can do to make that moment more exciting he’ll just let fly” (Interview Christie 30). As Calvin repeatedly reveals the consequences and also the limitations of his short-sighted worldview, the comics carry characteristics of a cautionary tale in which the reader is not confronted with a model behavior to copy, but warned of adapting certain behaviors. However, as the comic series is full of humor, it does not appear to the reader as a typical cautionary tale.

Despite living entirely in the present, Calvin also lives in his own fantasies, through which he explores new worlds. His vivid imagination makes him “a manic six-year-old whose inner world is open to unlimited experience” (Goulart, *Encyclopedia* 63).⁷ However, Calvin is neither merely a child, nor is he fully an adult – he is a hybrid, combining childlike and adultlike behavior, and rapidly shifts between the two. That versatility enables Watterson to leave the realm of a children’s world and insert debates of the adult world:

⁷ In the 2015 interview with Jenny Robb, Watterson mentions how adding a weirder kid than Calvin would change his role in the strip and Calvin would no longer be the outsider. He exemplifies that with Schulz, “when he put a cat in the strip. He decided the cat made Snoopy too much like a normal dog, so he abandoned the character” (24).

Calvin was never just one thing; he could function in a number of different ways. If I was thinking about some issue in current affairs, I could use Calvin to talk about it. If I just wanted to do something silly, I could use Calvin for *that*. If I wanted to remember an incident from my childhood, he could do *that*. If I wanted to examine some issue in my personal life, he could do *that*. If I wanted to make something up completely, he could do *that*, and so on. As a writer, one of the real pleasures of the strip was its versatility. I wasn't stuck with just one approach. Juggling a lot of balls kept everything interesting for me, and presumably this would be more entertaining for the readers as well. (Interview Robb 15)

The versatility of Calvin's character also makes him unpredictable: one moment he is a child with a bubbling fantasy, and in the next he is a frustrated adult sighing over the evil in the world. He acts unexpected and he has different sides that can best be described as pragmatic, sentimental, and philosophical.

Calvin the Pragmatist, Sentimentalist, and Philosopher

As a pragmatist, Calvin places his pragmatic – and mostly selfish – decisions and actions over reason. His self-assessment concerning the rest of the world is fairly bad: He does not see boundaries and limitations in what he can achieve. He is convinced that he will become famous, that he is a genius (*Drooling* 117): he is carefully planning his career as a teenage idol, as well as his autobiography. However, he does not want to wait to become a teenager, but wants to be idolized now, and offers Hobbes an autographed glossy (*Treasure* 9). He usually suffers from conceit that brings him into unlucky conflicts with his parents, Susie, or Moe. Conceit and his shortsightedness only results in him being usually quite short-tempered if his wish is not fulfilled instantaneously. He is moody and bursts out in anger when someone unexpectedly crosses his way or does not want to adjust to his life.⁸ He also cannot handle criticism and cannot accept that other characters mirror

⁸ In *Indis* 56, for instance, Calvin is in a bad mood and wishes the rest of the world to drop dead. In the end, he concludes that the only cure against a bad mood is to spread the bad mood.

his actions by treating him the way he treats others. When he kidnaps Mr Bun, Susie's toy, he feels only good about it until Susie does the same thing to him by kidnapping Hobbes. He complains, "All this was funny until she did the same thing to me" (*Killer* 32). The invention of Calvinball exemplifies Calvin's pragmatist attitude: Since Calvin fails to play according to the rules of baseball at school, he invents Calvinball (*Indis* 224) – a game in which the "on-the-fly rules are often as non-sensical as they are original" (Martell 108). Since Calvin is so blunt about his selfish intentions, he exhumes all the selfish sides of humankind and puts them and their ephemerality on display.

Calvin is also a sentimentalist. He lives out most of his emotions in a fantasy world since Hobbes, his best friend, is a stuffed tiger. However, his fantasy worlds are more than fantasies – they are almost hyper-reality or simulated reality in a Baudrillardian sense, as fantasy and reality merge to form their own reality. In contrast to his selfish and pragmatic character, Calvin also values the friendship with Hobbes, who, as an animal, is an outsider to the human society. Hobbes is the only one who means something to him. The only times Calvin feels sad for someone other than himself is for Hobbes, for instance, when his mother has to stitch Hobbes and he assists her with tears in his eyes (*Drooling* 118). When a burglary happened while Calvin and his parents were away for a wedding and Calvin assumes that Hobbes was stolen, he has an emotional outburst: "I TOLD Mom and Dad we left Hobbes behind I TRIED to get them to turn around and come back and NOW look, Hobbes was all alone when our house was broken into! Mom says Hobbes wouldn't have been stolen because he's not valuable. (sniff) Well, I think he's valuable" (*Indis* 73).

These are the rare situations in which Calvin genuinely feels sorry for someone else. Usually he is merciless when it comes to other people: He wishes Susie would step in front of a cement mixer (*Indis* 56), suggests she play in a microwave (*Author* 71), or wishes for his parents to disappear. Apart from Hobbes, he only shows compassion or concern for animals or for nature. Calvin seems to understand nature better than people around him: When he gets lost in the zoo, he goes to the tigers to ask them if they have seen Hobbes. When his mother advises him that "next time you should ask a PERSON for help," Calvin is genuinely astonished: "... oh ... that never occurred to me" (*Author* 198). In his fantasy, he explores new worlds, travels to Mars, time travels, has a

magic carpet, and lives in a world full of dinosaurs in which he experiences the greatest adventures (cf. ch. 4.5). Watterson uses a narrative technique in which he quickly shifts between the worlds, thereby often blurring the boundaries of fantasy and reality.

Calvin is also a philosopher. His philosophical and artistic streak is what makes Calvin's character so complex and sets him apart from a normal 6-year old. His vocabulary is unusually extensive for a boy of his age, and he muses on topics that are far beyond the horizon of a child: He philosophizes about death and the meaning of life; he questions morality, art, objective truth, and analyzes social trends. He also muses on the uses of art and the possibility to express one's inner life through art. However, his search for truth is distorted as he is often driven by a childish selfishness. He acts like a know-it-all, and since he does not pay attention to people around him, he does not make any friends. Calvin draws philosophical questions to the level of a suburban life.

1.3.2 "Hobbes is more about the subjective nature of reality . . .": Hobbes

Hobbes is introduced as the real hero of the comic strip in the *Encyclopedia of Comic Art*: "As mature, level-headed, and sympathetic as any tiger in literature, he provides a stabilizing influence on his human chum without ever dampening his exuberance" (Goulart 63). He is modeled after Watterson's cat Sprite (*Tenth* 22), and is named after seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Interestingly, Calvin and Hobbes are named after a European theologian and a European political philosopher, lending the comics a transnational ring. Additionally, *Calvin and Hobbes'* popularity stretches all across Europe, showing that, although the comic strips are rooted in their American context, they attract a worldwide audience, making them world literature.

Hobbes's entire existence as a stuffed or a real tiger⁹ is never fully clarified throughout the comic strip. Watterson admits that Hobbes "is

⁹ For Watterson, it seemed natural that Hobbes was to be a tiger and not another animal: "I don't think there was a lot of thought in that either. I wanted something less conventional than a bear. For Calvin, it should be a bit unusual. But I probably spent all of five minutes thinking about it. Once I hit on a tiger, of course, it was great – cats and I have a certain rapport, so

really hard to define and, in a way, I'm reluctant to do so. . . . But there's something a little peculiar about him that's, hopefully, not readily categorized" (Interview West 61). This peculiarity is that Hobbes is perceived as a stuffed animal for everyone but Calvin: Every time someone else than Calvin is around, Hobbes is seen as a motionless stuffed animal. Watterson never liked to think of Hobbes as an imaginary friend:

The so-called 'gimmick' of my strip – the two versions of Hobbes – is sometimes misunderstood. I don't think of Hobbes as a doll that miraculously comes to life when Calvin's around. Neither do I think of Hobbes as the product of Calvin's imagination. The nature of Hobbes' reality doesn't interest me, and each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue. Calvin sees Hobbes one way, and everyone else sees Hobbes another way. I show two versions of reality, and each makes complete sense to the participant who sees it. I think that's how life works. None of us sees the world in exactly the same way, and I just draw that literally in the strip. Hobbes is more about the subjective nature of reality than about dolls coming to life. (*Tenth* 22)

There are not simply two coexisting realities in which Hobbes is either a stuffed toy or a real tiger. His existence is more complex because as a wild tiger he also bears characteristics of a stuffed toy: Even as a real tiger, Hobbes needs some treatment he would usually only have as a toy.¹⁰ Whereas Calvin has to take a bath, Hobbes gets washed in the washing machine periodically,¹¹ or at times, his seam bursts, and Calvin's mother has to stitch him. Hobbes does not like this, as Calvin's mother "never uses any anesthetic" (*CnH* 71). This does not confuse

this was a very natural fit for me. Maybe Hobbes could have been some other animal, but he arrived as a big cat, and that expanded my connection with him. Hobbes was as much my alter ego as Calvin was" (Interview Robb 12).

¹⁰ It is often argued that Hobbes is merely a product of Calvin's fantasy. However, this proves that he is more than that: If Hobbes was merely the product of Calvin's fantasy and only an imagined tiger, his existence as a tiger would be consistent without any random intermingling of his stuffed toy-existence.

¹¹ Watterson describes the washing machine as "one of the stranger blurrings of what Hobbes is" although Calvin seems to "take this in stride" (*Tenth* 53).

Calvin at all or makes him doubt Hobbes's existence as a real tiger. Instead he accepts the otherness of Hobbes.

But Hobbes does not only need the treatment as a stuffed tiger. He also lacks some essential knowledge on tigers and seems astonishingly uninformed, which makes the reader occasionally question his existence as a tiger. Hobbes is shocked to hear that tigers are an endangered species, he struggles to climb a tree (*Author* 42), and he is scared of wild animals himself (*Indis* 84). Also, he has no answer to what their tails are for and suggests that tigers have them "because they look good." When Calvin replies, "So it's sort of a necktie for your butt?", Hobbes is disgusted: "Let's not be vulgar. You're just jealous" (*Author* 251).

But Hobbes is simultaneously proud to be a tiger, and he frequently jumps on Calvin and leaves claw marks. At times, Hobbes gives hints about his past in the jungle, and as an animal, he is driven by his instincts: He attacks Calvin at night and scares him so much that Calvin describes him as a "homicidal psycho jungle cat" (*Cat* 5): He attacks Calvin during daytime and defends his attack by saying, "You can take the tiger out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the tiger," to which Calvin replies, "The question IS, how can you get the tiger BACK in the jungle?" (*Indis* 98). Hobbes also claims that tigers are made of "Dragonflies and katydids, but mostly chewed-up little kids" (*Author* 129). This, of course, contradicts his fondness for tuna sandwiches. Furthermore, Hobbes is an animal that claims his territory, and there are invisible boundaries Calvin occasionally oversteps, which of course results in a severe tiger attack (*Packed* 150). Hobbes also feels that tigers are superior to men, for instance, when he argues that tigers do not have to go to school because they "wreck the grade curve" (*CnH* 44).

However, Hobbes's existence goes beyond that of a stuffed toy or a wild animal. As he lives in a suburban American setting, he shows anthropomorphic features, a humanization of his savageness. He questions humankind and likes to show the superiority of tigers over humankind (*Killer* 55), and yet Hobbes's life is heavily shaped by the human environment: He loves tuna sandwiches, and even suffers from hay fever (*Magical* 85). Watterson designed his body to display both animal and humanlike behavior: "Hobbes stands upright and talks of course, but I try to preserve his feline side, both in his physical demeanor and his attitude. His reserve and tact seem very catlike to me, along with his

barely contained pride in not being human" (*Tenth* 22). At times he also displays human characteristics: When he teaches Calvin about the complex processes of preying, he explains: "Attacking running animals involves a lot of physics. There's velocity, gravity and laws of motion, not to mention all the biology we have to know. Then there's the artistic expression of it all, and a lot more!" Calvin is impressed: "Gosh, I never realized killing was so grounded in the liberal arts." Hobbes' response is neither an answer that would be given by a toy, nor by a real tiger, but by a human: "My dissertation on ethics was VERY well received" (*Packed* 152).

His savageness is also strangely blurred with the suburban context when Calvin prepares a sandwich that he throws through the room for Hobbes to hunt down. Calvin comments, "That certainly was a grim spectacle," and Hobbes, while eating his toast, says, "I LIKE breakfast on the run" (*Cat* 115). The incongruity of the American breakfast and the hunting for food blurs the boundaries of Hobbes as a tiger and a stuffed animal, and the unexpectedness creates a humorous effect.

Watterson quickly shifts between the realities of Hobbes: Not belonging to either life – the world of toys or the wilderness – eventually defines his hybrid existence, and his 'belonging but not quite belonging' gives him the ability to shed light on human life from an outsider's perspective. When Calvin tells Hobbes that "Mom wants to know if we'd like to go to the zoo today," Hobbes replies, "Can we tour a prison afterward?" (*Treasure* 19). Through the eyes of an animal, the reader gains a new perspective on the institution of zoos and the shortcomings of the imprisonment of animals.¹² When Calvin asks Hobbes if he thinks humans evolved from monkeys, Hobbes replies that he sure does not see any difference (*Cat* 114).

As Calvin is the only character who perceives Hobbes as a real tiger, their relationship is essential for the strip. Little is known about Hobbes's past and what happened to him before he came to Calvin.¹³

¹² Hobbes criticizes zoos again when Calvin shows him a beautiful butterfly he caught in a glass. Hobbes replies, "If people could put rainbows in zoos, they'd do it" (*Magical* 51).

¹³ The first comic strip reveals that Calvin set out a tiger trap and caught Hobbes with a tuna sandwich. This quirky and random introduction of Hobbes was a step Watterson later regretted, as he said Hobbes does not need a context and an explanation of how he came to Calvin (*CnH* 6).

Hobbes is more thoughtful than Calvin and functions like a cynical but wiser big brother who brings Calvin back to earth. He cynically comments on Calvin's odd ideas (*Cat* 148) or critically opposes the absurd ones (*CnH* 44), he often pulls Calvin's legs or teases him, reads Calvin's comic books behind his back (*Packed* 115), plays tricks on Calvin (*Indis* 48), or attacks Calvin severely when he pokes fun at tigers (*Indis* 27). Yet the two of them are inseparable, and Hobbes proves to be his best friend and partner in crime. Calvin describes Hobbes as being "on the quiet side. Somewhat peculiar. A good companion, in a weird sort of way" (*CnH* 91). Hobbes is Calvin's counterpart as he is more than a phantasm who only exists in Calvin's imagination. Their relationship resembles that of a frenemy: although they are inseparable, they quarrel as an imaginary friend would not do. Hobbes is a complex character whose personality quickly bounces between his stuffed toy personality, his personality as a wild animal and his anthropomorphic features. Interestingly, Hobbes – the gentle and wise tiger – is named after the political philosopher who became famous for his philosophy of *homo homini lupus*: "that man to man is an arrant wolf" (Hobbes 89). On a philosophical level, that makes Hobbes's existence a parody of Thomas Hobbes's ego-centered worldview.

1.3.3 "... a 21st-century kid trapped in a 19th-century family": Calvin's Parents

Calvin's parents are the two most important side characters. Watterson paid careful attention to design them not merely as add-on characters to Calvin, but as independent and round characters. That can be seen in the fact that occasionally (few times only, however), individual strips are dedicated to the parents only which reveal the parents' thoughts and their personalities.

Both parents have no names, but are only referred to as "mom," "dad," or when they address each other mostly as "dear." The family is a stereotypical white suburban American family: The father is a patent

attorney (*Author* 252)¹⁴ and the mother is a stay-at-home mom. They are luddites whose world clashes with Calvin's action-driven world; Calvin explains his desperate situation as being "a 21st-century kid trapped in a 19th-century family" (*Treasure* 18). Calvin's parents are torn between loving their child (*Packed* 161) and being utterly frustrated by their son's behavior. Watterson sums up their existence as follows: "... well, that's sort of the running joke through the whole thing: that Calvin is such an awful nuisance that they're not eager to repeat that mistake" (Interview West 64). That has brought Watterson some criticism as some readers felt the parents did not love Calvin enough (especially because Calvin's dad once utters that he would have preferred a dachshund to a kid), but Watterson rather tried "to keep them realistic, with a reasonable sense of humor about having a kid like Calvin" (*Tenth* 23).¹⁵

Calvin's father is the only character of which Watterson admits to modeling after a real person – his own father.¹⁶ Calvin's father likes his office job and sometimes even regards it as an escape from Calvin, and he is often seen coming from or going to work. The father tries his best to prepare his son for life, and his highest aim is to build his character and teach his son values, which is read by Calvin as harassment (*Magi-*

¹⁴ About the father's job, Watterson explains that "[m]ost cartoon characters have a generic white collar job, but eventually I decided that Calvin's dad, like my dad, is a patent attorney" (*Tenth* 103).

¹⁵ Calvin also seems to feel that, because he says, "Mom wanted a girl. I just know it" (*Cat* 38). Watterson says, "Calvin's parents are sometimes ambivalent about their child's effect on their lives, as I imagine any sane parent would be. Depicting that used to disturb some readers, who expected family strips to be highly sanitized. Now that television sitcoms are commonly a half-hour volley of vicious insults, this sort of strip looks positively heartwarming" (*Tenth* 130).

¹⁶ Watterson describes him in the following words: "So a lot of Calvin's dad was an affectionate ribbing of my own dad, and he got a big kick out of it. I don't think he realized how odd he was until I put him in the paper. I'd draw him coming back from a run in the freezing rain, excited about eating oatmeal and prunes, thinking 'Ah, this is the life!' and the joke is that there's no joke in that – that was my dad. In all the more normal situations in the strip, I'd inhabit the dad character myself, just as I did with the other characters, and imagine how I would react to whatever the story was" (Interview Robb 14).

cal 51). Despite his impatience toward Calvin's misbehavior, his father tries hard: He tries to teach him how to ride a bicycle, how to play baseball, how to solve math equations, how to clean a fish, how to handle allowance, and how to develop a good work ethic (*Packed* 52). As Calvin deems most of these things (apart from the allowance, of course) unnecessary, Calvin suspects that his father secretly wants to kill him and hopes for a new father (*Author* 55). His father has a decent sense of humor and quite frequently takes advantage of his superior position and Calvin's gullibility by making up entire nonsense answers in response to Calvin's questions. For example, when Calvin asks, "Why does the sky turn red as the sun sets?" his father replies, "That's all the oxygen in the atmosphere catching fire" (*Indis* 115). However, his father does not only work in relation to Calvin. Instead, he also has distinct individual features – he loves nature and adventurous morning rides on his bike.

The mother is, as Watterson says, rather the "daily disciplinarian, a job that taxes her sanity, so I don't think we get to see her at her best" (*Tenth* 23). She struggles with her son's disobedience and finds creative means to cope with her son. In one comic, Calvin is in his tree house with Hobbes and tells him, "Mom says if I stay up here for two hours, three days a week, I don't have to take any lesson this summer" (*Cat* 158). And yet, the reader gets to know the mother as a caring mother. For instance when Calvin loses Hobbes in the woods, she is the one who convinces the father to go looking for Hobbes in the night (*Author* 68-70).

At times, his parents are a great mystery to Calvin: When Calvin accidentally crashes their car, he expects a harsh punishment. Instead, the following happens:

Calvin: "They were so relieved no one got hurt that all we got was a lecture on safety and asking permission. They didn't even raise their voices. Parents are sure inscrutable, huh? Send their car over a ditch and you don't even get yelled at."

Hobbes: "... but try keeping live worms in your dad's ..."

Calvin: "Let's not talk about that, huh?" (*Indis* 85)

For Calvin, their behavior is highly mysterious, and he sometimes tries to imagine what his parents do when he is not around. Of course, his imagination runs awry – that his parents could be aliens from a different planet – but Calvin never solves the mystery.

The relationship between the parents is also depicted, which is uncommon for a comic strip. The parents' personalities are so distinct that occasionally there are comics that only revolve around them, for instance, after a burglary when the parents are in bed and feel how their sense of security at home has started to crumble. The reader gains a deep insight into the parents' characters and the challenges of adult life when the father sighs,

It's funny... When I was a kid, I thought grown-ups never worried about anything. I trusted my parents to take care of everything, and it never occurred to me that they might not know how. I figured that once you grew up, you automatically knew what to do in any given scenario. I don't think I'd have been in such a hurry to reach adulthood if I'd known the whole thing was going to be ad-libbed. (*Indis* 75)

Since the reader gets to know the parents not only as Calvin's parents but also as independent characters with their own thoughts and fears, the two characters gain depth and become more accessible to the reader as more than just characters who support the protagonists.

1.3.4 Susie, Moe, Rosalyn

There are three other side characters that have frequent appearances: Calvin's classmate Susie, Moe the school bully, and Rosalyn the babysitter. Susie is the smart neighbor girl, the cliché studious student always prepared for class. As she always has As, she is the natural favorite of the ever-frustrated Mrs. Wormwood, the class teacher, who is named after a character in C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* (*Tenth* 25). Since she is the seeming personification of good, she is Calvin's natural nemesis and a target of his atrocities. At the beginning of the series, there is still the tension of a love-hate relationship between the two which soon dissolves (*CnH* 45). She is the reason why Calvin founds his secret club G.R.O.S.S. – Get Rid Of Slimy Girls. She suffers by Calvin's hand, but knows how to defend herself and easily outsmarts him. Her greatest nightmare comes true when she is paired up for group work with Calvin (they have to prepare a group presentation on bats), as Calvin does not care about good grades and thorough research. There are also three comic strips in which she appears on her own, that is when

Calvin is rude to her (*CnH* 117; *Drooling* 69-70). All three of them show how she pretends to be strong, but how Calvin's words actually hurt her. Susie's inner life is revealed to the reader, and the reader is torn between feeling sorry for her as a victim of Calvin's bullying and feeling sympathy for Calvin.

Moe also has a regular appearances in the comics. He is the school bully with little intelligence and a small vocabulary who, for no reason, beats up Calvin. He differs from the other characters in that as he is a flat character – he does not show any emotions and does not appear in any other context. Frequently, Calvin makes sassy remarks to Moe that he quickly regrets.

Rosalyn is a teenager from the neighborhood who stocks up her allowance by babysitting. Since she is the only babysitter the parents can find for Calvin, she determines the price and is not shy about raising it. As there is no other option, the parents stick with her, although she spends the evening on the phone with her friend Charlie. As Calvin does not particularly like her, the two often argue. The only time she and Calvin get along is when she agrees to play Calvinball with Calvin. Interestingly, although Calvin hates her, she is the only person who is allowed to play that fantasy game with Calvin and Hobbes, and she is the only person who is able to engage in the game and grasp the concept quickly. Hence, she even outdoes Calvin (*Magical* 103).

Although these characters serve to support the main cast of Calvin and Hobbes, all of them develop their own personalities. With that small set of characters that revolve around Calvin and Hobbes, the comics set out to explore and discuss broad social and cultural issues.

In order to fully grasp the series, the nature of the genre and its publication process needs to be taken into account as it shapes the entire visual and textual narration in the comics. Therefore, it is time for a closer look at the definition of the genre, the impact of the interdependence of the two different sign systems, image and text, and the narrative potential they have as a serial publication in newspapers.

2 NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIPS – A DEFINITION

2.1 “Comics”: A Definition

Comics in general have gained attention among present scholars since Art Spiegelman received the Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* in 1992. Ian Gordon analyzes this “power of *Maus*” in his article “Making Comics Respectable: How *Maus* Helped Redefine a Medium.” However, the enthusiasm with which scholars turn toward the newly discovered medium too often neglects taking a step back and thinking about the materiality of the medium: What is it that defines a comic?

Etymologically, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* traces the origin of the word ‘comic’ back to the Greek word *kōmos*, ‘to revel’ (*OED Online*), which can be found in the term ‘comedy’. This placing of comics near the field of humor is one reason that comics have often not been taken seriously in the past, and has resulted in a counter-movement in which scholars and artists feel urged to justify the serious potential of the genre.¹ Thus, scholars have turned to other languages to find a different approach. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen argue that other languages emphasize different qualities: The German language emphasizes the sequence of images by using the term *Bildergeschichte*, as does Dutch by referring to *strips*; Italian focuses on speech balloons (*fumetti*); Spanish highlights the narrative quality (*historietas*), and the French accentuate the visual qualities by using the term *Bande dessinée*. (xii–xiii). This flight into different languages serves to drag the genre away from the aura of shallow entertainment. However, none of the terms have become fully accepted; at the end of the day, no term is all-embracing or sufficient, for each of them again only represents one aspect of comics. Therefore, the term ‘comic’ still prevails (although the term

¹ An example is Thierry Groensteen’s article entitled “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?” which asks why comics are still belittled as a mere entertainment medium.

‘graphic novel’ has partly replaced the comic book). Dietrich Grünewald, who attempts to bring together modern picture stories (“moderne Bildgeschichten”) and “Comic Prints” of the eighteenth century, finally resigns and admits that the term ‘comic’ has prevailed as a collective term, although it is a diffuse term, and although it is impossible to find an all-embracing definition (*Comics* 4).

Grünewald does not only explain that the term ‘comic’ cannot be erased from the cultural awareness, but he also turns to the medium as such to examine what the broad term refers to. So he suggests that ‘comic’ is an umbrella term, subsuming various subgenres.

2.2 “... both of these things at once and therefore neither”: Comics as a Hybrid Form

If ‘comic’ is an umbrella term, what does the term encompass? The one feature all subgenres of comics have in common is that they consist of two different sign systems: image and text. This dichotomy of the comic’s “word/wordlessness focus,” as Hillary Chute describes it (“Decoding” 1023), has been an issue in comic research over the last decades. *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, an entire collection of essays dedicated to that very matter, was published in 2007 by Robin Varnum and Christian Gibbons. According to Klaus Schikowski, this is the characteristic feature of comics:

Im Comic vereinen sich also zwei verschiedene Zeichensysteme, Bild und Sprache. Wer sich also einen Comic zur Hand nimmt, muss sich, um das Gelesene verstehen zu wollen, nicht nur auf die Zeichnung einlassen, sondern er muss auch den Zusammenhang zwischen dem geschriebenen Text und der Grafik herstellen: Er muss die Zeichensysteme interpretieren. (22)

Picture and text do not simply coexist, but they are interdependent on one another.² That makes them, as Daniel K. Raeburn points out, “both

² At this point it can be debated in how far single-panel cartoons figure in. Rainer Schwarz argues that they have to be read entirely differently than comic strips, for the reader looks at the picture first and then reads the text (11-12). This simultaneity and interdependence of word and text, which is

of these things at once and therefore neither" (17). In comics, two sign systems merge into one; they are "not a simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true mixture" (Harvey 9). That constant referentiality makes them inherently parodistic as they suggest a homogeneity of signs that is not given, described by Ole Frahm as the parody on the referentiality of signs with one referring to the other without being fully able to stand on its own ("Parodistische Ästhetik" 204; *Sprache* 36).

Following the path of hybridity, it becomes clear why no text-word-combination can be regarded as comic: In picture books, for example, though images and text are united, the illustrations have a mere supportive function. Though some picture book illustrations have gained immense popularity and even excelled the story of the picture book, still they function to serve the story. For instance, most people are familiar with Ernest Shephard's world famous illustrations of Winnie-the-Pooh that accompany Alan Alexander Milne's story about Christopher and his old bear without being able to recall the plot. The same is true for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: Although it is unthinkable without the illustrations, the storyline works without John Tenniel's illustration.

However, at that point it should be mentioned that not all scholars consider words an essential ingredient of comics. Scott McCloud does not mention the use of text in his definition of comics as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (*Understanding* 9).³ Kunzle says that the pictorial part of comics "must be considered as its primary feature. A comic strip can consist of pictures alone; many do today and many did in earlier times; but it cannot be dominated by text" (*Narrative Strips* 2). However, this debate seems mostly to take place in an academic surrounding, for comics that do not contain text are rare exceptions, and when the comics do not contain

essential for comics, is broken up. Scott McCloud opts for the easier way by simply excluding cartoons from his definition of comics because they are not sequential (*Understanding* 21-22).

³ However, that does not mean he considers them unnecessary: In his later work, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (2006), he argues that words are necessary as they bring "with them an unparalleled level of specificity" (30).

text, it is explicitly mentioned. Shaun Tan's book *The Arrival*, for example, only contains images and no text, and is delineated as a "wordless graphic novel" on the first page. However, the hybrid definition ignores the humorous function: Comics are merely defined formally through their "visual-verbal blend principle," as Harvey phrases it, and not by their content (11).

Since comics are an in-between of text and image, in terms of genre questions they are a unified blend of a form of painting and a form of literature. Comics can neither be treated entirely as literature nor entirely as painting. That complicates not only the reading process in so far as it requires the ability to read both simultaneously, but also the analysis, as attention needs to be given to both the visual and the verbal components. Thierry Groensteen describes their hybrid character as being one of the comic's five 'symbolic handicaps' that cause their devaluation:

In effect, comic art, just like the cinema, which is also a hybrid genre, goes against the 'ideology of purity' that has dominated the West's approach to aesthetics since Lessing. . . . I only wish to show the extent to which comics (where text and drawings contribute to the same narrative project) dispute the validity of the dominant trend of thought and therefore could not do otherwise than to provoke the disdain and contempt of the defenders of official culture. (38)

Thierry claims that the hybrid character is the comic's default that makes it a lesser-accepted genre. That, however, does not necessarily bereave them of their quality. Bart Beaty argues that the comic's hybridity cannot be the reason, for if that was true, opera and ballet, which are both hybrid forms as well, must also suffer from devaluation (*Comics Versus Art* 21). Instead, it makes comics a multilayered and complex genre, for which unique analyzing tools are required.

The hybridity impacts the analysis of comics in so far as most tools in comic theory are borrowed from visual art theory for the visual parts and literary theory for narrative techniques.⁴ From all visual arts, the resemblance to painting/illustration, but also to film is striking. The term

⁴ At this point, different parallels have been drawn. In *Erzählerische Vermittlung im Comic am Beispiel des amerikanischen Zeitungscomics „Calvin and Hobbes“*, Marianne Krichel defines three neighbouring genres, the narrative, drama, and film.

“movies” describes nothing else than moving images in the same way that comics do not capture a snapshot but tell a story in a sequence of images. Scholars often draw on film theory to analyze the visual side of newspaper comic strips because in their composition, comic strips use “cinematic techniques” (Perry and Aldridge 11). The relationship between moving pictures that capture a sequence, the coherence of time and space in images, was first examined by photographer Eadweard Muybridge in the early twentieth century, at the same time when newspaper comic strips were on the rise. His chronophotographic technique enabled him to capture the movement of objects with several shots per second, thus creating the first comic strip in photos (McKane 360). The individual photographs stapled together would be like a flip-book and thus similar to a (short) animated film. The hand-drawn counterpart was developed around the same time by comic artist Winsor McCay, who invented the first film animation by unreeling one illustration after the other.⁵ Film and comic strip thus face similar multimedia challenges, as said by McCloud, “Space does for comics what time does for film” (*Understanding* 7). John L. Fell argues that “a number of additional relationships emerge between film and the comics if we broaden our perspective to view the strip artist and the filmmaker as confronting common problems of space and time within the conventions of narrative exposition” (89).⁶

The application of techniques and terminology used both in visual arts as well as in literary studies for the narrative parts creates an entirely new toolbox for analyzing comics. Additionally, there is a terminology unique to comics that describes features inherent in that art form alone – such as panel, gutter, speed lines or speech balloons.⁷ Thus, the hybrid

⁵ Cf. the youtube video “1911 Winsor McCay – ‘Little Nemo’ (full animation in color).” It shows the first animation film of Winsor McCay in which Little Nemo and his friends come to life. In the film, McCay plays with features of animation, such as the surprising piecing together of the characters, or the distortion of their proportions.

⁶ See Inge: “It [the comic strip] also anticipated most of the techniques associated with the film, such as montage (before Eisenstein), angle shots, panning, cutting, framing, and the close-ups” (“Comic Art” *Handbook* 77).

⁷ This new toolbox created to understand comics has been approached by semiotic scholars who regard comics as an entirely new language. This has even created a whole new field of semiotics. In 1974 Wolfgang K. Hünig

definition serves as a foothold to approach the complex genre of (newspaper) comics that requires more than the ability to read a book or the ability to look at a picture (Engelmann 21).⁸

2.3 A Formal Approach to Newspaper Comic Strips

Newspaper comic strips are more than a hybrid: They are defined as several-panel narrations published in newspapers. Thus, there is a formal difference between a comic strip and a cartoon: Whereas the comic strip refers to a series of panels, or, as Scott McCloud expresses it in his attempt to find an all-embracing definition for comics, a “deliberate sequence” (*Understanding* 21)⁹, the cartoon consists of one panel only, capturing one snapshot.¹⁰ Caricatures (or, as they are often called, editorial or political cartoons), such as Mike Luckovich’s political satirical statements, are traditionally drawn as single-panel cartoons and usually

published his work *Strukturen des Comic Strips: Ansätze zu einer textlinguistisch-semiotischen Analyse narrativer Comics*. Neil Cohn chooses a similar approach of reading comics as signs and as a language in its own right. He speaks about “visual language theory,” but admits that his work “is less about comics, and more about language and the mind” (7). He approaches comics as a language, but since this approach is rooted in linguistics, looking at comics from a merely structural viewpoint, it will not be further examined here.

⁸ This is what Ulrich Krafft already said in his PhD thesis in 1978.

⁹ McCloud excludes cartoons from his definition of comics altogether: “For all the doors that our definition opens, there is one which it closes. Single Panels like this one are often lumped in with comics, yet there’s no such thing as a sequence of one! Such single panels might be classified as ‘Comic Art’ in the sense that they derive part of their visual vocabulary from comics, but I say they’re no more comics than this still of Humphrey Bogart is film” (21-22). At this point, McCloud’s theoretical framework seems too short-reaching, for if *The Far Side Gallery* or *Ballard Street* are no newspaper comic, what are they then? Often, the use of these terms is quite sloppy. Members of the “National Cartoonists Society” also include comic strip artists. And the term “cartoonist” does not explicitly refer to artists drawing cartoons, but also to comic strip artists.

¹⁰ In 1977, Rainer Schwarz distinguishes between „Bildwitz“ (=cartoon) and „Comic“ (= comic strip) (11).

serve a different function: Herbert Block defines the cartoonist as “the kid who points out that the Emperor is without his clothes” (qtd. in Pogel and Somers 105). Apart from consisting of a single panel and serving a different purpose, they also have a different and longer history than newspaper comic strips – they played a role in American newspapers already in the eighteenth century (Pogel and Somers 106). But even humorous newspaper cartoons – like Gary Larson’s *Far Side* series – follow different narrative rules as they only capture snapshots and often feature an indistinct set of characters with less developed individual characteristics. Bill Watterson points to the difference, “I don’t really compare one-panel strips to four-panel strips because there are different opportunities with each. . . . The four-panel strip has more potential for storyline and character involvement than just a single panel” (Interview Christie 31). Due to their different narrative techniques, one-panel cartoons are excluded from this research and the definition of newspaper comic strips. As the dominant form of the newspaper comic is the (comic) strip, these terms are often used interchangeably.¹¹ Comic strips are also referred to as “funnies,” a term borrowed from George Delacorte’s magazine *The Funnies*, published in the thirties, featuring original comics (Gabilliet 8).

Scholars have frequently attempted to embrace comic strips by defining a set of formal requirements that should be included in a comic strip. The amount of necessary constituents suggested by different writers ranges from three to up to seven, but the common consensus can be compressed into two essential constituents: 1. There needs to be a sequence of images (as the term ‘strip’ already suggests); and 2. comic strips need to be narrative in their character.¹² When Grünewald defines comic strips as “picture stories of the twentieth century,” he implies that comic strips are stories told in images (*Comics* 15).¹³

¹¹ In 1973, Kunzle points out that “[s]ingle cartoons appear regularly in the comics section of the American newspaper, but they remain quite distinct and in a small minority, in relation to the strips” (*Narrative Strips* 2).

¹² These two constituents are intertwined, as a sequence of images needs to be given to tell a story. Of course, this is a very broad definition and most scholars added more components they consider essential. However, adding more components would be rather restrictive for comic strips.

¹³ “Bildgeschichten des 20. Jahrhunderts.” Cf. Coulton Waugh who said that comic strips are a “sequence of pictures, which may be funny or thrilling”

Other components have been added, but they are rather suggestions of conventions, such as speech balloons,¹⁴ a recurring cast/character Waugh describes as “a continuing character who becomes the reader’s dear friend” (14),¹⁵ the link to mass media,¹⁶ the open-ended framework of the narration (“Comic Art,” *Concise Histories* 73), the “preponderance of image over text” (Kunzle, *Narrative Strips* 2), the use of speed lines or onomatopoetic words (such as “Wham!” “Pow!” “Zap!”), the use of 3-4 panels, or the potential jokes (Perry and Aldridge 10-11). However, according to Hillary Chute, “it is not so important to *define* comics, to construct an exclusive box around the medium (this is comics and this is not) as to write well about what we consider comics can do, and what work they are accomplishing through various properties peculiar to the form” (“Decoding” 1020). The question of their function is equally important to grasp the genre and goes beyond a mere normative level by posing the question of their potential beyond the narrative structures imposed on them.

(14). Kunzle speaks of a “sequence of separate images” (*Narrative Strips* 2), Rainer Schwarz refers to the “Bildreihung” (11), and Bill Blackbeard argues that comic strips need to be a “serial sequential narrative in drawn panels” (qtd. in Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* 27); Grünewald says there needs to be “eine inhaltlich-chronologische Folge von Bildern (panel), in einem Streifen angeordnet” (*Comics* 3). Inge defines it as “an open-ended dramatic narrative about a recurring set of characters, told with a balance between narrative text and visual action, often including dialogue in balloons, and published serially in newspapers” (“Comic Art,” *Concise Histories* 73). One exception worth mentioning here may be the Sunday pages.

¹⁴ Rainer Schwarz, for instance, adds speech balloons (11), as does Coulton Waugh (“... speech in the drawing, usually in blocks of lettering surrounded by “balloon” lines”) (14) and Bill Blackbeard (“told by explanatory dialogue balloons within the story panels with little or no narrative text” (qtd. in Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* 27). Grünewald argues that text is necessary, but not in form of a speech balloon, as Prince Valiant, for instance, works with subtitles (*Comics* 3).

¹⁵ Bill Blackbeard argues for the same (qtd. in Beaty *Comics Versus Art* 27), as does Inge (“Comic Art,” *Concise Histories* 73).

¹⁶ Again, Grünewald (*Comics* 3) Inge (“Comic Art,” *Concise Histories* 73), Kunzle (*Narrative Strips* 2) argue for the same, as do Beaty and Nguyen: They say that comics need to “have been produced in the context of mass publishing since the 1830s” (vxi).

2.4 “The significance of any art lies in its ability to express truths”: The Function of Comic Strips

One outstanding feature of characters in newspaper comics is that they mostly rely on sympathy. They do not convince the reader of their physical attractiveness (as commercials try to do), but they are closer to a representation of daily life. Gilbert Seldes argues that comics are a great “corrective to magazine-cover prettiness,” as they seldom feature physically attractive protagonists. Instead “it is notable that the comic strip remains grotesque and harsh and careless” (196). Comic strips offer a stage for imperfection where human flaws in daily life are exhibited, but also reflected and commented on in a humorous way, which makes it easier for the reader to identify with comic strip characters. Most comic strip characters are neither beautiful nor tremendously intelligent: Walt in *Walt and Skeezix*, Hans and Fritz from the *Katzenjammer Kids*, Krazy Kat or Ignatz, or even Dilbert display no particular beauty or heroic character traits. Comic strips do not create an unreachable ideal as superhero comics do, but rather sketch the as-is state of the human character. Instead of mastering lofty heroic rescue missions to save the planet, comic strip characters cope with small nuisances of daily life familiar to the common reader, such as a challenging day job (Dilbert), normal family life and the troubles at school, or quarreling siblings, (the Patterson family in *For Better or for Worse*). Whereas the newspapers print the shocking current events from around the world, the comic strips often juxtapose the mundane happenings in life.¹⁷

In that respect, comic strips are not only closer to life, but they also carry an entirely different potential. Bill Watterson argues that their ability to entertain and still tell of daily life makes them an art form, as they are capable of expressing truth: “To attract and keep an audience, art must entertain, but the significance of any art lies in its ability to express truths – to reveal and help us understand our world. Comic strips, in their own humble way, are capable of doing this. . . . Surprise is the essence of humor, and nothing is more surprising than truth” (*Tenth* 207). Comic strips are not, as Knigge suggests, merely a comical

¹⁷ This is, however, the standard. Of course there are exceptions, such as *The Adventures of Smilin’ Jack*, or *The Adventures of Patsy*. Also the all-time favorite *Little Orphan Annie* carries a political message. Cf. ch. 3.2.2.

and more exciting version of our own daily life (“33 Fußnoten” 20), nor, as Jim Davis thinks, an “escape from reality. If nothing else, they force you to take a break, sit back and relax for a minute while you enjoy your morning coffee, and hopefully prompt you to think, ‘life’s not so bad’” (Interview). Instead, their potential lies in the conveying of truth through fiction. Comic strips have the potential to stage characters whose exact rendering of daily life is surprising to the reader. In that way, they can even mean to parody life and institutions because this means “to believe in a better mode of conduct which people fail to live up to, and humor may serve as a gentle but sometimes bitter or angry corrective” (Inge, “What’s so Funny” 82). They are subtle and not overtly educational, and yet they usually have a surprising and often humorous climax. When Calvin wonders, “where we go when we die,” Hobbes unexpectedly replies: “Pittsburgh?” Calvin’s follow-up question, “You mean if we’re good of if we’re bad?” makes the reader smile, but it also carries truth about man’s limited viewpoint on earth (*CnH* 20).

Therefore, comics are not caught in a sign system that repeatedly plays with the same jokes over and over again. Their nature of recurring surprise has the potential to confront the reader with the deepest questions of human nature, its shortcomings and limitations, and are thus capable of conveying truth just like other art forms do. In that respect, comic strips carry an unexpected and rather hidden potential. A closer examination of the comic strip’s unique technique of employing humor – the Comic Mode – will be examined in chapter 4.4.

The following chapter examines how newspaper comic strips have responded to their function and capability to express truth throughout history. The chapter follows a chronological order to trace the evolution and the cultural influences that shaped the genre throughout the twentieth century. Eventually it serves to locate Bill Watterson in the broader historical framework and discourse of the genre. A discussion of the historical scope will not only help to comprehend the genre, but also to comprehend Watterson’s particular stance on the art of newspaper comic strips in its broad context.

3 THE HISTORY OF NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIPS

3.1 “... comics can be vehicles for beautiful artwork and serious, intelligent expression”: The Evolution of the Comic Strip

In 1989, Bill Watterson gave a speech at the Festival of Cartoon Art at Ohio State University entitled, “The Cheapening of the Comics.” It was his last public appearance in person before he dedicated his time solely to the creation of the comic strip. In his speech, he revealed his understanding of what newspaper comic strips are capable of as an art form, but also pointed to the discrepancy between the current state of newspaper comic strips and their artistic potential. To demonstrate what newspaper comic strips are capable of, he referred to three comic strip series, *Pogo*, *Peanuts*, and *Krazy Kat*, all of which were valuable to him as the strips

reflect uniquely personal views of the world, and we are richer for the artists’ visions. Reading these strips, we see life through new eyes, and maybe understand a little more – or at least appreciate a little more – some of the absurdities of our world. . . . They argue powerfully that comics can be vehicles for beautiful artwork and serious, intelligent expression. (94)

Watterson argues that comic strips can work intelligently, and yet he poses the question why comics of the eighties content themselves with so little: “If comics can be so much, why are we settling for so little? Can’t we expect more from our comics pages?” (94).

To understand *Calvin and Hobbes* and its significance for the American (comic) culture of the eighties and nineties, it is essential to examine the history of newspaper comic strips, how they came into existence, what they achieved in the past and how they degenerated in Watterson’s eyes to mere “stupidity and crude craftsmanship” (98). For Watterson, “much of the best cartoon work was done early on in the medium’s history” (94). Therefore it is helpful to go back in history to

the early beginnings to look at how comic strips lived up to their full potential.

Comic strips existed throughout the nineteenth century, but they did not enter the newspaper realm until the late nineteenth century. The newspaper comic strips had mostly European predecessors: Wilhelm Busch's *Max and Moritz* served as an inspiration for Rudolph Dirk's *Katzenjammer Kids* (Fuchs and Reiterberger 16). Swiss painter Rodolphe Töpffer had already developed graphic techniques for modern newspaper comics in Europe and developed a "battery of montage devices" and "the graphic language, the grammar and syntax" (Kunzle, *Nineteenth Century* 349)¹ which was then adapted in American newspaper comics. The first American illustrated humor magazine to feature social humor and political cartoons was *Puck*, first issued in 1877, soon followed by the magazines *Judge* (1881) and *Life* (1883) (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 15; Knigge, *Massenblatt* 15).

Twenty years later, at the turn of the century, the humorous comic strip entered American newspapers. In the age of modernism, American culture underwent severe changes; it is a time in America declared by Mark Twain as the "Gilded Age" that still had to cope with the developments and the social aftermath of industrialization, and at the same time had to embrace the future. For Ian Gordon, comic strips are the result of modernism and a "humor-based response" to social transitions and problems (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 6).² Comic strips do not only mirror their time, but they also respond to it, thus proving their ability to "see life through new eyes," as Watterson suggests. The coincidence of radical and quick changes in the fields of technology, demography, and culture enabled the emergence of the new genre.

¹ His work "Histoire de Monsieur Cryptogame" was also one of the first humorous drawings that made their entry into the periodical press (Smolderen 75). See also: David Kunzle, *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* (2007). In this work, he traces political, social, and artistic influences and how these are mirrored in his works.

² The chapter on the graphic and narrative parameters will show how the structure of the genre contains modernist elements.

The Gilded Age: Technological, Cultural and Social Changes

The majority of technological inventions that impacted the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be dated back to the late nineteenth century: The national telegraph and the transatlantic telegraph led to a sudden diminishing of the world and made it possible to communicate across the continent instantly;³ the telephone made direct communication possible; the typewriter replaced the handwritten text for the average citizen; the adding machine reduced man's work; and the electric light bulb led to a shift in the perception of time, for people became less dependent on daylight and could now work deep into the night (Capozzoli Ingui 13). All these technical innovations made America an "industrial giant" by 1900, and America's rural areas were especially altered with the introduction of mass-agricultural machines (Shrock 1).

A broader circulation of newspapers led to the development of quicker and cheaper printing methods. The acceleration of the pace of information distribution fostered a dependency of the population on media and led to a rise of newspaper circulation by 700% between 1870 and 1900. In addition to the larger circulation of newspapers, the appearance of the medium changed as costly woodcuts were replaced by illustrations, made possible by better printing methods and cheaper photographs (Knigge, *Massenblatt* 15). This, in turn, led to a rise in illustrations in magazines and newspapers, and magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* or *The Children's Magazine* began to feature illustrations (Gabilliet 5). By 1900, 915 American cities had daily newspapers, of which 559 had competing daily comic strips, and 10 years later, in 1910, 1,207 American cities had newspapers with 689 newspapers that carried dailies (Harvey 7).

The late nineteenth century also brought forth cultural changes. Literary naturalism that aimed at depicting man as being determined and controlled by his instincts and outer circumstances such as the social and

³ Cf. Neil Postman, who regards the invention of the telegraph as the birth of "information" as we know it today: "The idea – that there is a content called 'the news of the day' – was entirely created by the telegraph (and since amplified by newer media), which made it possible to move decontextualized information over vast spaces at incredible speed" (Postman, *Amusing* 8).

economic environment was at its peak (Hart, "Naturalism" 585). Socio-critical novels of the 1890s such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie a Girl of the Streets* (1895) or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) formed the literary counterpart to Outcault's comic strip hero, the yellow kid, in the series *Down at Hogan's Alley*, the first newspaper comic strip. At the same time, mass production led to the standardization of processes, leading to the division of work, and the manufacturing process and the labor of the engine led to a relief of human labor and provided more leisure time than ever.⁴ This newly gained surplus of leisure time led to a rise in new recreational activities, such as collecting photographs. Toys, sports, board games, jigsaw puzzles, were produced (Shrock 149). This rise of manufactured products led to tighter competition among companies, and advertisement agencies grew. The first large successful advertising campaigns were launched by Uneeda Biscuits and Heinz (Shrock 46). In the same way, newspapers wooed their readership by adding attractive and entertaining offers to their newspapers – such as comic strips.

The late years of the industrial revolution also had social impacts on the population. By the turn of the century, the United States had turned into a leading industrial giant with many big cities: Whereas the urban population in 1860 was 6.2 million, it had grown to 30 million by the end of the century. In 1850, New York counted as many as 515,000 inhabitants: This climbed up to more than 3.4 million by 1900. America's rise as an industrial nation and the prevailing idea 'from rags to riches' attracted many immigrants from abroad. Between 1866 and 1900, 13.25 million immigrants entered the country, bringing along new ways of living, cultures, and traditions (Shrock 2). That sudden urbanization led to an increasing social gap, and quickly left many immigrants disillusioned. Crime increased, for which often immigrants were blamed (Shrock 11). Journalist Jacob Riis's famous photo documentary *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890)

⁴ Cf. Elmer Rice, *The Adding Machine* (first performance in 1923, published in *Three Plays*, 1965). In this play, human labor is replaced and outdone by the work of machines. "What do you think I am – a machine?" Mr Zero asks in the play (10). And he is told by his boss that he will be replaced by an adding machine: "A mechanical device that adds automatically. . . . They do the work in half the time and a high-school girl can operate them. Now, of course, I'm sorry to lose an old and faithful employee –" (13).

illustrates the shady sides of America not only in words, but also in photographs and illustrations, and the downsides he captured were humorously mirrored in early newspaper comic strips.

These technological, cultural, and social changes paved the way for newspaper comic strips. Newspaper comic strips emerged at a time in which, as Knigge argues, the “Lesejahrhundert,” the century of reading – i.e., the nineteenth century – was replaced by the “Bildzeitalter,” the century of images (“33 Fußnoten” 20). The first generation of comic strip artists were convincing in their art because they were free from expectations and restrictions laid upon them by syndicates, the newspapers, and the audience. They were free to develop their art genre, and they used it to creatively view their own world through new eyes.

3.2 “Reading these strips, we see life through new eyes . . .”: The First Generation of Artists (1890s-1920s)

For Bill Watterson, the first generation of newspaper comic artists was capable of creating true artworks: “Sixty years ago, the best strips weren’t just amusingly drawn, they were beautiful to look at. I can’t think of a single strip today that comes close to that standard of craftsmanship. Now we have plenty of simply drawn gag strips, but not much else. We’ve lost an essential part of what makes comics fun to read” (*Tenth* 9). Bill Watterson insists that newspaper comic strips are capable of conveying truth, and this was especially true for the first-generation comic strips. Through the prism of newspaper comic strips, the artists humorously shed light on different social, artistic, and political issues. The first generation embraces the time from 1894, when the Yellow Kid entered the newspaper,⁵ to the 1920s, when artistic conventions for

⁵ Defining the birth of newspaper comics has been a matter of debate: Ian Gordon argues, “It is generally agreed that comic strips developed in the Sunday supplements of Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*. These papers added the strips in a drive for increased circulation” (*Consumer Culture* 7). Coulton Waugh also argued for the Yellow Kid as a starting point as early as 1947, and Smolderen dedicated a whole book to the Yellow Kid as the first newspaper comic strip: *The Origin of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*. That date was officially supported in an international scholarly

comic strips had fully developed but the competition of the comic book had not yet impacted the comic industry and syndicates had not yet grown into an independent entity with power over the artistic process.⁶

3.2.1 "... the sense of fantasy and use of humor masked a sense of despair": A Reflection of Social Topics

Hogan's Alley, the comic strip that featured Mickey Dugan (or "the yellow kid," as he became widely known), first appeared on 5 May 1895 in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. The comics are not mere entertainment, but they reflect and comment on social issues of the time: immigration, the social gap, upper and lower class life, arts, etc. The first comics featured a street setting in the tenements of New York with kids playing. Instead of the characteristic speech balloons, text was added as a narrative subtitle.⁷ Later, the Yellow Kid began to speak, and the text was first printed on his clothes and shifted later to speech balloons. In October 1896, Outcault developed the characteristic sequence of images (Knigge, *Massenblatt* 16). The Yellow Kid – at that time still with a blue shirt, which later changed into a yellow night gown – plays a subordinate role in the first comics, and gradually shifts more into the

panel in Lucca, Italy in 1989. (Cf. Horn 16). Yet scholars still refuse to accept the date: Balzer and Wiesing, for instance, point out that the first *Hogan Alley* comics were nothing more but an extended caricature (76).

⁶ In his work *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves*, Arthur Asa Berger describes the first generation of comic artists as "The Innocents," which according to him ends with the end of the Great War. His title refers to Henry Farnam May's 1959 publication *The End of American Innocence: A Study of First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*, in which he argues that it was not the terror of World War I that shook American society, but an American disillusionment starting even before the war (xiii). Within, or maybe because of this disillusionment, comic strips worked their way successfully into newspapers.

⁷ Prior to that, Outcault had already published some minor similar drawings in the magazine *Truth*.

foreground of “Hogan’s Alley.”⁸ Although the setting and the characters are fairly realistically drawn, the Yellow Kid stands out visually: Due to his disproportionate body, his bold head, the protruding ears, and the caricatural facial expressions, the yellow kid does not seem to fit into his surrounding and “is distinctly different from any thing [sic] else,” as Outcault himself describes his creation (Knigge, “33 Fußnoten” 19). Often, the Yellow Kid is also graphically set apart from the other characters by not participating in the plays but looking at the scene amusedly and commenting on it as an outsider, thus mediating between the setting and the reader, and sometimes even addressing the reader directly.⁹

The social dimension of the comic strip is obvious: The setting is a parodistic tongue-in-cheek description of immigrant life in the tenements of New York. The Yellow Kid and his gang are sassy and loud children, always jolly, ignoring rules, rampaging in the city and mocking upper class society – along with an old goat, a chatty old Irish parrot and a black cat. Their use of colloquial language is full of intentional puns and ambiguities, as, for instance, when the Yellow Kid sets out to tour Europe with “Letters of Introduction to the Prints of Whales an de no Ability of Yoor Rup” (“Around the World”). In passing, he turns the Nobility in a group of people with “no ability.”

The setting alone does not make the comics a social comment, but the comics reveal a deeper, less jolly reality: in the ‘gilded age’ people tried to conceal the obvious hardships with superficial amusement. The Yellow Kid cannot – despite its humorous spirit – deny the troubles of the late nineteenth hundreds.

⁸ It is one of the modern myths that the Yellow Kid turned yellow because yellow was the first color ever used – it happened rather accidentally. In 1896 the pressmen complained that the colors were too “wishy-washy.” According to Don Carlos Seitz, business manager of the *New York World* at that time, the valiant colorist C.W. Saalburg spontaneously said: “‘All right, I’ll make that kid’s dress solid yellow!’ Suiting the action to the word he dipped his brush in yellow pigment and ‘washed’ the ‘kid.’ For once Kelly was right. The ‘solid color’ stood out above all the colors in the comic. The ‘yellow kid’ arrived” (Seitz 90-91).

⁹ A more detailed analysis of the presentation of the yellow kid can be found in Balzer and Wiesing 17-20.

Despite many puns, colorful pictures, and jokes, the comic strip has a sad undertone within a “world of anguish and pain”: Violence, poverty, war, and a struggle to survive are recurring themes in the comics (Berger 31). Even the physical appearance of the Yellow Kid alarmingly resembles a child in a documentary



photograph of Jacob Riis’ “The Baby’s Playground” (1888-1895). Due to the instant threat of lice, children in the tenements often had bald shaved heads, and it was common for children to wear their elder sisters’ nightgowns to play outside (see: photo p. 54). Outcault must have seen some of these children on the streets and been inspired by them.

Within this genre that aimed at entertainment and attracting an audience, serious issues that root the Yellow Kid in an early twentieth-century setting were also touched, such as social conflicts within the upper society, politics,¹⁰ or media.¹¹ Asa Berger describes the Yellow Kid’s world as that of

tough, dirty little immigrant kids and disheveled old women with sad eyes and a hopeless look on their faces. There were Negro children, with kinky hair or thick white lips, Irish toughs, and mangy, ragged animals.

¹⁰ cf. Berger 30: “There was a good deal of reference to politics in *The Yellow Kid*. One episode was devoted to the gold-and-silver question, which figured large in the McKinley-Bryan election of 1896, The Yellow Kid’s robe says “fer O’Brien. At last I am inter politics.” And there were a number of other signs and posters referring to gold and silver.”

¹¹ In “The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph,” for instance, the Yellow Kid listens to a supposed recording of the phonograph which praises the Sunday pages for starring the Yellow Kid, but in the last picture he has to learn that it was not a serious recording but only the chatter of a bird who has hid in the box. This comic has a serious and disappointed undertone – disappointed in the achievements and promises of the media (Oucault, “New Phonograph”).

The ambience was chaos, with bodies sticking up everywhere and crowding the space in the cartoon, just as it was felt that we were beginning to get crowded in America.

In *The Yellow Kid*, the sense of fantasy and use of humor masked a sense of despair. (Berger 27)

Despite – or because of – the comic’s social and critical stance, it grew immensely popular in the first year, and Pulitzer launched a whole advertisement campaign: Pulitzer painted his delivery vehicles yellow (Knigge, “33 Fußnoten” 20), and the Yellow Kid appeared on cigarette packs, fans for ladies, cracker tins, and buttons (Harvey 4). Within the very first year of the genre’s existence, newspaper comics already had to deal with the issue of commercialization, and as society was not as overloaded with images as in the later twentieth century, the campaign was a success and the Yellow Kid turned into the first comic celebrity. However, the commercialization of the strip took on different forms than in the eighties and nineties. Although Bill Watterson opposed merchandizing for his own creation, he did not oppose it as such, but criticized the wanting correlation between the original comic strip art and the commercial items: “I’m not against all licensing for all strips. Under the control of a conscientious cartoonist, certain kinds of strips can be licensed tastefully and with respect to the creation” (“Cheapening” 97). In the late nineteenth century, when gift shops and souvenirs had not reached the dimension as in later years and did not yet underlie the extreme ‘kitschification’ that evolved in the middle of the twentieth century, the Yellow Kid items were meant as to advertise not only the items, but primarily the comic strip and the newspaper. In the late twentieth century, merchandizing turned into an end in itself, often pushing the comic strip into the background.¹²

Outcault’s success was so overwhelming that Pulitzer’s competitor William Randolph Hearst from the *Morning Journal* bought Outcault from the *New York World* in 1896 (Harvey 6). It turned into the first copyright debate as Pulitzer then hired George L. Luks to continue the

¹² In 1902, Outcault even created an explicit advertising character, Buster Brown, which shows that the concept of a comic character selling items was regarded as a different matter (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 43).

comic strip, entitled *The Yellow Kid*.¹³ The comic strip still remained popular, and in 1897, publisher G.W. Dilligham reprinted Outcault's comics as *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* – the early stage of a comic book so to speak (Gabilliet 5).

There are other early newspaper comic strips that address social gaps and feature a lower-class protagonist who self-ironically mocks his own status and has humorous and unexpected interactions with his surroundings: Frederick Burr Opper's *Happy Hooligan* was first published in 1899 and plays with an indirect criticism on the insuperable social gap. The protagonist is a misadventurer and tramp who is well-intended and wants to help others, but usually worsens the situation and is punished in the end. In many cases he also clashes with upper-class society, for instance, when the hooligan, in an unlucky incident, stands on the king's coat, which then tears apart (Opper). *The Katzenjammer Kids*, drawn by German immigrant Rudolph Dirks, was released in 1898. It is modeled after the German picture story *Max und Moritz* and centers around Hans and Fritz, two cheeky boys and their harmless tricks and jokes. Hans and Fritz indeed show a resemblance to Max and Moritz, thus carrying the European humorous picture story into American newspapers. That self-ironic transnational but Americanized translation of a European comic strip plays, just like the Yellow Kid, with colloquialisms and English misspellings typical of a German native speaker commonly heard in the streets. Dirks's comic series also bears an artistic novelty: He was the one who created a first stock of signs that established themselves as essentials for comics, such as speedlines, or the little stars that whirl over a hurt character's head (Knigge, "33 Fußnoten"

¹³ Since copyright for comic characters had never been an issue before, Outcault addressed the Library of Congress on 7 September 1896, asking for the copyright of his character: "I desire to know if I can copyright this little character – as he appears in a different position each week. His costume however is always yellow, his ears are large; he has but two teeth and a bald head and is distinctly different from any thing [sic] else" (Knigge, "33 Fußnoten" 19). The case was brought before the court, and the judge decided in favor of the copyright violator: Though Outcault could decide in which newspaper his artwork should run, the character could be continued by other artists (19-20). The only concession made concerned the copyright of his character's name which still remained with Outcault (Balzer and Wiesing 22).

21). He also introduced sequential narrative panels and speech balloons as necessary devices and contributed to the establishment of narrative conventions for comic strips, from which his colleagues profited (Harvey 7).

However, there are more ways to address social issues than using a lower class protagonist. Frank King's comic strip *Gasoline Alley* is an outstanding comic strip that comments on social issues as a "Continuity Strip" (Harvey 11).¹⁴ *Gasoline Alley* was one of the first successful series in which the comic strips followed a chronological and consequential order in which the characters age in real time, and the strips form a coherent plot that extends over many years. *Gasoline Alley* started in 1918 in the *Chicago Tribune* at a time when the Henry Ford Model T became accessible to the broader population, and it targets that audience: The protagonist is Walt Wallet, who meets with friends to discuss cars. After some time Frank King and the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Joseph Patterson, decided to leave the automobile setting to address a broader audience. Thus, he turns the series into a family strip: In the comic strip on Valentine Day 1921, Walt Wallet finds a little baby on his doorstep. Walt names the boy Skeeze, adopts him. Soon he marries (Braun 225). The characters in the comic age in real time, and the readers could witness little Skeeze growing up. During World War II, just like millions of other young American men, Skeeze also went to war. Frank King did the comic strip until 1959 and was then replaced by other artists. The comic is still being published in the newspaper today; it is currently syndicated by the *Tribune Content Agency* and currently drawn by Jim Scancarelli. It now features the grandsons of Walt ("Gasoline Alley by Jim Scancarelli"). *Gasoline Alley* is an example for a newspaper comic strip in which a strict chronology is consequently maintained. In that series, life happens on three layers: The characters in the comics experience everything the readers themselves go through – the Great Depression, war, etc. But on a third layer, it also describes the family life of Frank King, whose life shows parallels to Walt and Skeeze. He himself had a son only three years older than Skeeze, and his brother-in-law looks suspiciously similar to Walt. In that respect, the

¹⁴ Other comic strips that feature continuity strips were Roy Crane's *Wash Tubbs* (1924), *Barney Google* by Billy DeBeck (released 1919), or *The Gumps* by Sidney Smith, released in 1917.

comic strip creates a parallel world that accompanies the reader over years and reflects real social problems on a fictional level.

Comic strips as a means to address social issues was common for the first generation of comic artists. As several comic strips used lower class or immigrant protagonists, the assumption at hand is that comics as a partially visual medium were added to the newspaper to offer a medium that also appeals to a non-native speaker audience of immigrants. That is certainly true, as Pulitzer addressed a broader audience than other magazines and newspapers that also aimed at immigrants and workingmen (Shrock 181). Thus, the *New York World* was a newspaper that attracted a broader readership with entertaining offers; it was, for instance, also the first newspaper to introduce the crossword puzzle (Britannica “New York World”). The comic strips operate with puns and require a certain language level to grasp the jokes – so it was certainly not merely aimed at non-native speakers. As in novels at that time, a lower-class protagonist was rather a popular device to steer the attention toward social issues. Therefore, the comic strips did not necessarily address a primarily illiterate readership or a non-English speaking readership, but were meant to entertain a middle-class readership.

3.2.2 Reflection of Art Movements and Political Movements

Today, newspaper comic strips and fine arts are on two different ends of the scale. However, the first generation of newspaper comic strips held a close relationship with the modern art movement. The mingling of art and entertainment in early comic strips was a natural process for the early artists.

Windsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (released in 1906 by the *New York Herald*) thematically as well as artistically responds to modernism: Thematically, McCay created a Surrealistic comic strip that takes the reader on a journey instead of aiming at a punch line, as he reinvents reality over and over again. In every first panel, the protagonist Little Nemo (Latin for “nobody” – in the comic strips he has a passive role, rather reacting to his surrounding) falls asleep. He encounters adventures in “slumberland,” an imaginary world in which he wants to find the princess to play with. In the last panel, Nemo wakes up, usually familiar to his previous adventures – if Nemo falls from a height, he

wakes up because he fell out of bed; when he encounters gigantic mushrooms, he wakes up with a stomach ache. Alexander Braun, the curator of the 2016 exhibition in the Schirn in Frankfurt, “Pioniere des Comics: Eine andere Avant-Garde” (“Pioneers of the Comics: A Different Avant-Garde”), argues that newspaper comic strips were themselves the pioneers of the avant-garde: Windsor McCay, who made the dream the central motif for his comic strips, became a precursor of Surrealism, which deals with the fantastical and the absurd and became popular in the twenties (Braun 56). Not only does the topic reflect modernism, but also McCay’s drawing style shows influences by the *Art Nouveau* style that was still en vogue in the early twentieth century. His comic strips have an upright and large format of 51x42 cm (Gardner 244), and he meticulously creates the dream worlds with fine contours and accurate and cautiously drawn calligraphy. The architecture and the portrayal of children’s faces and their long dresses are reminiscent of *art nouveau* artist Alfons Mucha’s use of detailed ornaments, his precise and accurate paintings of women, and his dim color palette, in which the colors are so cautiously harmonized that the entire painting appears to be kitschy. Windsor McCay’s harmonious choice of color marks his filigree craftsmanship.

The works of Lyonel Feininger show how newspaper comic strips and fine art were not regarded as opposites. Though he is widely known for his cubistic architectural artworks, he began his career as a newspaper comic artist and regarded comics as his masterpiece. Though his comic strips *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie’s World* were not widely successful, the architectonical portrayal of the world in his comic strips shows humorous parallels to his paintings. In *Wee Willie Winkie’s World*, the protagonist Wee Willie Winkie is often seen from the back how he perceives and interacts with the personified landscape in which houses have faces (Blackbeard, *100 Jahre* 75), or the sun or clouds have faces (McGurk). Artistically, his painting style points to Caspar David Friedrich’s Romantic paintings, in which the reader contemplates on the landscapes through the eyes of the person in the painting (Braun 110). However, even when Feininger turned toward Cubistic paintings, at times his painting style still carried features of a

comic style.¹⁵ When Dorothy C. Miller, the first female professional curator, opened an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in October 1944, Feininger sent a Christmas card with five carved wooden figurines enclosed – five of his comic characters. Though his Cubistic paintings had gained wide fame, he decided to send five comic characters to the most influential woman in the American art world (Braun 124).

One other remarkable comic strip series is Gustave Verbeek's *The Upside Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo* that ran in newspapers only from 1903-04 (Knigge, "33 Fußnoten" 23). Although the plot is simple (the comics tell short adventures of Old Man Muffaroo and Lady Lovekins), they are marked by a graphic sophistication: When the reader reaches the end of the strip, the page has to be turned upside down and the plot continues. The strip is meticulously designed to make the illustrations and characters also work upside down, thus attaching a double meaning to each illustration, showing the ambiguity of signs. Verbeek raised a creative bar for newspaper comics, and by now, even those newspapers that had not carried comic strips felt urged to introduce the graphic bonus.

Krazy Kat (1913-1944) is closely related to Dadaism through its lunatic narration and visual rendering. George Herriman, a self-taught artist, played with fragmentation and unexpected narration and intertextual references to literary works. *Krazy Kat* is about the unanswered love between the protagonists: Krazy Kat is head over heels in love with Ignatz, a mouse, who dislikes Krazy Kat and proves his disaffection by throwing bricks at the cat which, in return, is interpreted by Krazy Kat as a token of affection. Offissa Pupp, the local policeman, however, is in love with Krazy Kat, who does not reciprocate. To attract Krazy Kat's attention, Offissa Pupp puts Ignatz in prison for throwing bricks at Krazy Kat. Apart from the storyline and the often subtle linguistic humor, the series is known for rather unconventional and creative use of panels and their unexpected shapes. His narration is unpredictable and often surreal; the world he creates does not follow any logical pattern, but he seems to reinvent his setting anew with each panel. Watterson says that "virtually every panel features a different landscape,

¹⁵ Cf. Balzer and Wiesing 80. For more details see Scheyer 23-24. Particularly his paintings of people often had distorted proportions that made them look comic-like.

even if the characters don't move. The land is more than a dropback. It is a character in the story, and the strip is 'about' that landscape as much as it is about the animals who populate it" ("Krazy Kat" 9). His use of language contains crazy and unpredicted elements as well as references to Shakespeare. Watterson describes his appreciation for *Krazy Kat*: "The scratchy drawings delight me no end. They have the honesty and directness of sketches. So many of today's strips are slick and polished, the inevitable result of assistants trying to develop a mechanical style that can be continued indefinitely. The drawings in Krazy Kat are whimsical, idiosyncratic, and filled with personality" (8). And Watterson concludes his eulogy on Herriman by saying, "Krazy Kat was not very successful as a commercial venture, but it was something better. It was art" (9).

Although it was a less common device, some comics also picked up explicitly political topics. As the newspapers themselves were already concerned with everyday politics, the comic strips seldom displayed a specific political stance but were rather meant as a humorous add-on. An explicit political message would exclude newspapers with a different political orientation as potential customer to run the comic strip, and as political satire and political cartoons already existed, newspaper comic strips with a political message did not become popular. The most famous and long-living political comic strip is Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*. *Little Orphan Annie* was a success: It is a story of an orphan girl Annie, who, with her dog Sandy, is adopted by the wealthy Warbucks family. Recurring topics in the comics are communism and the Roosevelt New Deal. The comic ran in the newspapers for 86 years and was adapted into a successful Broadway musical and two films (1982 and 2014).

Early newspaper comic strips were freer to experiment and branch out into the fields of cultural and social issues, art, and politics. They were also free to experiment with artistic and narrative features, thus lifting newspaper comics to such heights as to create "meaningful art," as Watterson insists. Of course, not everything the first generation created was gold, but they were free from outer restrictions and immediate competition through the comic book. Maybe it is the influence of the first comic artist generation that made Watterson not regard comics and art as opposing poles. Occasionally, for non-newspaper publications, Watterson used watercolors to color his comics – a medium rarely used

for comics – thus further exemplifying he considers fine art and comics to be compatible.

The end of the first generation of comic strips is marked by extraneous influences that shaped the genre: First of all, the increasing power of the syndicate in the 1910s shaped newspaper comic strips as they intervened in the publication process and had a voice in the artistic process. But also the rise of comic books marked an incision for the unhindered creative play of newspaper comic strips. Both changes took place in the late twenties and thirties.

3.3 Mid-Twenties and Thirties: The Formation and Reinforcement of Structures

3.3.1 The Rise of Syndicates

The first incision for newspaper comic artists was the rising power of syndicates and stronger hierarchical structures that developed in the early twentieth century. As comics grew popular, small syndicates were founded to provide an effective distribution of the comics. The first syndicate was Newspaper Feature Service Inc., founded by Moses Koenigsberg (the editor of the *American*) in 1913, followed by Hearst's Newspaper Feature Service, and United Features in the thirties (Blackbeard, "Smithsonian" 16). In 1915, Newspaper Feature Service Inc. and other syndicates run by Hearst merged. Koenigsberg became the president, and the syndicate was renamed King Features (King as the anglicized version of "Koenig"), which still exists today.¹⁶

The intention of syndicates was to ease the publication process by breaking up the responsibilities and distributing them to different people. Initially thought of as an institution associated with a specific newspaper to distribute the featured comic to other interested parties, from the fifties on it grew into an independent entity. While the artists did the creative work, the syndicate now took over the marketing and distribution responsibilities (Holtz 28). The centralized distribution also enabled easier access to full comic collections: In 1911, Bud Fisher's

¹⁶ Today it features comic strips such as *Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *Hagar the Horrible*, *Popeye*, or *The Katzenjammer Kids* (Perry and Aldridge 8).

Mutt and Jeff was the first daily strip that was reprinted as a collection in a book, sized 5.75x15.5 inches. The first reprints also impacted the format of comics. Whereas comics had not been bound to any format so far, the New York publisher Cupples & Leon now specialized in reprinting dailies with a square standard book format with only black and white comic strips for 25 cents. Between 1919 and 1933, one hundred books were successfully published, and soon other competitors adapted the format, e.g., *Comic Monthly*, issued in 1922 (Gabilliet 6-7).

First and foremost, the founding and establishment of syndicates in the twenties and thirties meant a more efficient organization of the guild. For the artist, it meant a release from painful business work, and comic strips could be distributed more easily. Newspapers did not have to hire individual artists for their newspapers; instead, they could buy the publication rights for the strips from the syndicate. Syndicates also allowed the business to expand, and structurally opened the opportunity for newspaper comics to become a part of popular culture across the country. Newspapers from all over the country could easily run the same comic strip series. Although in the twenties and thirties the syndication business was still in its infancy, the foundation for a broad distribution system and commercial business were laid.

3.3.2 The Emerging of Comic Magazines and Comic Books

In his article “A History of Narrative Comic Strips,” Jared Gardner argues that comic strips is a medium that has always been other-directed: “The history of the comic strip as a narrative medium over the course of the century is arguably the story of the impact of new players on the field: film, radio, the comic book, and television. Each of these new media had forced the comic strip to reconsider its audience and the rules by which it told stories” (Gardner 251). Although his list excludes the internet and webcomics – which will be later discussed in chapter 3.6 – a major change for newspaper comics happened with the rise of comic books, forcing newspaper comics to adjust to the new competitor on the market. That makes the thirties the “Golden Age” for comic books, but not for newspaper comics (Schikowski 18).

As people grew more interested in newspaper comics and started collecting the strips, syndicates began to publish the collections of syn-

licated strips. However, as only one comic strip a day was published, much time passed between the publication of the collection of syndicated comics. At a time in which the world sped up, in which television moved quicker and information spread faster, the pace of comic strips seemed almost anachronistic, and in order to keep up with the pace, syndicates began to publish their own original material. The first attempt to publish an independent comic was *The Funnies*, published by George Delacorte Jr. in 1929 (Dell Publishing). It contained 16 pages of original 4-color artwork and appeared each Saturday (Gabilliet 8). As the readership also included children, he carefully avoided violence and crime (Kreshel 91), but *The Funnies* only survived for 36 issues before it expired (Goulart, *Comic Book Culture* 11; Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 129). Other early comic books were designed as advertising means for companies. In April 1933, Harry I. Wildenberg published the first regular comic book, *Famous Funnies*, published as the “Gulf Comic Weekly” by the Gulf Oil Company (Goulart, *Comic Book Culture* 12).¹⁷ This successful strategy encouraged Wildenberg to release the independent monthly magazine *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics* together with Maxwell C. Gaines in 1934 (Schikowski 18).¹⁸

This was the starting point for the evolution of an entirely new genre that does not only differ in length, but also addresses a different readership, features different heroes, and overall obeys different graphic and narrative rules (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 131). The readership for comic books shifted from children and adults who read newspaper comics to adolescents reading comic books (Knigge, “33 Fußnoten” 20). Comic books became more action-driven and introduced two new types of heroes: the superhero and the detective, to whom was devoted a whole book, *Detective Comics* was published by Harry Donenfeld, who was the publisher of National Periodical Publications, soon be known as DC Comics, “DC” standing for Detective Comics.¹⁹ The comic book

¹⁷ Procter & Gamble published the successful *Funnies on Parade* in 1933, the first stapled half-tabloid-sized pamphlet. Companies such as Canada Dry, Wheatenas or Kinney Shoes followed (Gabilliet 8).

¹⁸ Detailed research on comic magazines and early comic books, however, is challenging, as it is nearly impossible to retrace all the magazine and early publications of which many lived only for a short period of time.

¹⁹ In 1938, Donenfeld also published *Action Comics*, which introduced the commercially successful Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster

industry boomed: By June 1941, 10 million copies of comic books sold per month (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 128).

Whereas comic books rapidly developed and adjusted to the readership and conditions of the market, newspaper comics nearly statically remained within the boundaries of the realm of newspapers without even attempting to emancipate themselves from their carrier medium (Schikowski 18). The rapid and successful emancipation of comic books disabled newspaper comics to leave the newspaper, and the overlarge success and presence of comic books in American culture rather tied newspaper comics closer to their carrier medium.

The content of newspaper comic strips also shifted in two directions: Like comic books, they also began featuring adventure comics, which Aldridge describes as an “escapism from depression trauma” (Perry and Aldridge 12).²⁰ Adventure strips such as *Buck Rogers* by Richard W. Calkins and Phil Nowlan (1929), the comic strip translation of Rice Burrough’s *Tarzan* (by Harold Foster), *Dick Tracey* (1931) by Chester Gould, *Alley Oop* (1932) by V.T. Hamlin, *The Adventures of Smilin’ Jack* (1933) by Zack Mosley, or *Captain Easy, Soldier of Fortune* (1933) by Roy Crane, and Milton Caniff’s adventure series *Terry and the Pirates* (1934), emerged and now also featured adult heroes (Inge, “Comic Art,” *Handbook* 78). They offered the reader an escape into a world in which at the end of the strip the world would fall back into its normal order and problems could be solved.

But newspaper comics also shifted toward regionalism and family strips. The thirties also brought forth successful comic strips such as *Blondie* by Chic Young, a family comic whose protagonist Blondie lives together with her husband Dagwood Bumstead (first published in 1930), *Li’l Abner* (1934, painted by Al Capp), the satire of a Hillbilly life (the first comic strip set in the South), Hal Foster’s *Prince Valiant in the Days of King Arthur* (1937), or *Little Joe* by Ed Leffingwell, a Western comic strip. Some years later, in 1948, Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*, which featured a set of anthropomorphic animals in the Okefenokee Swamps in

(Inge, “Comic Art,” *Handbook* 81). However, Siegel and Shuster lost all the rights to DC so that all the money eventually went to DC (Gordon, *Consumer Culture* 133).

²⁰ Of course, there had been other adventure comic series even before 1929, such as C.W. Kahles’ *Hairbreadth Harry*, published in 1906.

the Southeast, entered the newspapers. Whereas previous comic series often featured generalized non-places and experimented with time and space, a new shift to regionalism and a clearly defined place in time and space happened – the American South and West entered the comic strips in an attempt to render a life readers could identify with to reach a specific audience.²¹

3.3.3 The Reception of Comics in the Society of the Thirties

This newly gained broad presence of comic books in society also prompted a broader reaction from the readers. When Karl Marx said in 1856, “In unsern Tagen scheint jedes Ding mit seinem Gegenteil schwanger zu gehen“ (Marx 3) – every effect that is created also creates a counter-effect – comic books and newspaper comics were affected by two seemingly contrary reactions at the same time: as comics suddenly became the subject of fine arts discourse, they also became subject to sexual brutalization in the form of the “Tijuana Bibles,” the pornographic comic book and predecessor to the Underground Comix of the sixties.

As soon as comic books evolved, they found themselves in an identity crisis of whether they belong into the department of fine arts. In Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (published 1936) the tension between the original artwork and the reproduction of art and loss of authenticity is discussed (Benjamin 1237), similar to “The Culture Industry as Mass Deception” by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Benjamin 1237); John Dewey in *Art as Experience* argues that art is something set apart “of the things of ordinary experience” (9) and shifts the focus on the new media of art, such as “things he [the average person] does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently,

²¹ Other comic strips that have their origin in the thirties were, for instance, *Pete the Tramp* (1932) or *Clarence D. Russell. Detective Comics* is the title of an American comic book published by DC Comics. *Batman* and *Superman* were published by DC in 1933. The same year, *Nancy* was launched. *The Addams Family* by Charles Addams was first published in 1938.

newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits" (4). American writer Gilbert Seldes strikes the same path in his work *The 7 Lively Arts* (1937), in which he extends the notion of the traditional fine art forms, examines popular art and culture and describes the comics' quality as a great "corrective to magazine-cover prettiness" as the comics rarely portray pretty girls (196). But critics like Clement Greenberg also entered the discourse, and in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* he argues that comics falls into the category of kitsch,²² an "ersatz culture" for the formerly illiterate folk. Kitsch prescribes emotions, is mechanical, and is transported to the masses (39). In the forties, first attempts were made to approach newspaper comics as a genre in its own right, and writers tried to find different categories to systemize it. In 1942, Martin Sheridan published the first compilation of comic strip artists, *Comics and Their Creators: Life Stories of American Cartoonists*, in which he summarizes the lives of individual artists, enriched with little anecdotes from their lives. Though his work is not a scholarly attempt but a loose sequence of anecdotes, it is a valuable work because it shares details otherwise forgotten. Only five years later, in 1947, Coulton Waugh wrote a book entitled *The Comics*, the first structured approach to categorize comic strips. Though some of his research and data is not entirely correct, as Inge points out in his introduction to a later edition of the book, Inge praises it as "not only the first comprehensive history of the comics in America, it is also the first evaluative study of the medium" (xii).²³ In the forties, newspaper comic strips gained attention as a genre in itself for the first time.

Paradoxically, at the same time this discourse was held, the pornographic Tijuana Bibles came into existence. They parodied familiar and often innocent comic series, such as *Donald Duck* or *Tarzan*, but

²² For him, kitsch is "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazines covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." (39). Some years later, however, kitsch turned into an important feature of Postmodernism.

²³ "Waugh nevertheless did a magnificent job of reading the runs of the major strips and charting their progress and development up to the mid-forties. No one else had undertaken such a task to that time, and regretfully few commentators since then have done their homework the way Waugh did" (xii).

also political characters, such as Hitler or Stalin, and were printed privately. They flourished and were sold illegally in bars mostly in the Tijuana area. It is said that they received their name from their broad popularity which made the little books even appear in hotel room drawers instead of Bibles (Schikowski 59).²⁴ They were the early precursors of the Underground Comix, and intentionally brought comics in context with violence and sex.

In how far is all of this necessary for newspaper comic strips when it only affected comic books? Whereas the discourse of whether comics should be considered art or not never reached the living room of average families, the brutalization of comics did, and by the mid-fifties comic books enjoyed an overall bad reputation as being harmful for children. Although the criticism was primarily directed at comic books, newspaper comic strips and comic books were rarely differentiated, and the criticism on comic books harmed the reputation of the genre of comics in general. Thus, from the fifties on, newspaper comic strips suffered from the bad reputation of comics so that eventually comic artists themselves began to see comics only as a commercial opportunity.

3.4 The Fifties and Onwards: How Could It All Go Wrong?

In the thirties and forties, comics in general still found themselves as part of the discourse whether to be regarded as an art form or not. Whereas comic books partially achieved cultural acceptance in the form of graphic novels from the seventies onward, the state of newspaper comic strips decreased over the years and led to Bill Watterson's criticism in the eighties and nineties.

Two factors influenced the downfall of newspaper comics: First, the censorship of comic strips through the syndicate and the decreasing reputation of comic books led to the censorship of comic books through the Comic Code Association (founded in 1954) and resulted in a disillusionment of the comic artists. Secondly, the rise of Pop Art shaped the

²⁴ Little research has been done on Tijuana Bibles, and since they circulated illegally, many comics are lost today. One book has been published by Bob Adelman, *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America's Forbidden Funnies*.

self-conception of comics as they popularized the comic strip and a new more simplified drawing style.

3.4.1 The Censorship of Comics in the Fifties

One *Calvin and Hobbes* Sunday strip shows a page of the comic book Calvin is reading. The page is full of pointless violence, and when Calvin gasps and wants to watch TV instead, his mother switches off the TV and suggests he read a book. Watterson uses the comic as a medium to comment on the strong presence of violence in comic books (*Treasure* 104). Although Watterson comments on comics of the eighties, this criticism of comic books had already been voiced earlier in the fifties. A *Peanuts* comic strip in the early 1950s illustrates the bad reputation of comic magazines. Charlie Brown stands in front of a comic book rack advertised with “For the Kiddies. Comic Magazines.” The titles of the comic books carry titles that are as frightening as they are unsuitable for children: “Terror,” “War,” “Hate,” “Stab!,” “Slash,” “Mob,” “War,” and other gruesome headlines. Charlie Brown exclaims, “What a beautiful gory layout!” (Didd n.p.).

This quality downslide of course called for criticism. In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published the world famous book *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he analyzes the ill effects of comic books on young children and their further (emotional) development. The book had tremendous impact on the world of comics, not only in its wide reception and harsh criticism,²⁵ but also in so far as Wertham called for a

²⁵ He was widely ill-reputed and reviewed in newspapers as a panicmonger, e.g., in a *New York Times* article published on 25 April 1954 by Wright C. Mills, entitled “Nothing to Laugh At,” or an article by Harold C. Gardiner published in the magazine *America*, “Comic Books: Cultural Threat?” Even up to today, his legacy has been rather described as a “one-man crusade against comic books in the late forties and early fifties” (Lopes 42). Steve Geppi, the president of Diamond Comic Distributors said that it is “hard to believe that just fifty years ago because of *Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham comics were being vilified. Comics were blamed for impairing the development of our children and contributing to juvenile delinquency” (qtd. in Rhoades 57). However, Bart Beaty defends him by saying that his criticism was less about comics as such, but about the cultural

censorship for comics. That sort of censorship existed already for TV,²⁶ and Wertham pleaded for an extension to comics. Interestingly, he excluded newspaper comic strips entirely from his criticism, as he argued that newspaper comic strips already underlie that censorship through the syndicate (Wertham 14-15). This says reveals the perception of syndicates in the fifties: No longer were syndicates regarded as an equal or even as an assistant to the artists to relieve them from their multiple businesses; the syndicates had taken over the position as a judging power and censor over the artists. For Bill Watterson, this rise of the power of the syndicates marks a severe incision in the artistic freedom of the artists:

Whereas the early cartoonists experimented, starting and stopping strips as their interests changed and discovering what appealed to the local audience along the way, syndication has encouraged the calculated production of strips to mirror trends and capitalize on the specific interests of desirable demographic groups. Marketing strips on a large scale encourages comics to be conservative, easily categorized, and imitative of previous success. The comics have gained immense readerships and have become very profitable this way, but at some cost to the comics' early exuberance. (*Tenth* 8)

This rising dependency of the artists on the syndicates forged the path for newspaper comics to shift into the realm of strategic marketing. Along with this shift came the less artistic claim to present meaningful art which marked the initial point for the commercialization of newspaper comics and the focus on making comics suitable to the taste of the masses.

The result of Wertham's book was the founding of the Comic Code Association in 1954, which led to the founding of a committee to set up

industry: "Wertham regarded the general notion of a commercialized culture for children as far more pressing than the specific question of comic books" (*Wertham* 131).

²⁶ The Motion Picture Association of America, the MPAA, responsible for censorship of film, had been founded as early as 1922 (Motion Picture Association of America).

moral regulations for comic books (Engelmann 29).²⁷ On 26 October 1954, the Comic Code was published.²⁸ The independent and non-governmental Comics Code Authority (CCA) was founded to guarantee that comic books abided by these rules.²⁹ Although the CCA affected the comic books (and enhanced the rise of the pornographic Underground Comix, with key figures such as Robert Crumb and his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb, and Art Spiegelman³⁰), it also produced a tragic twist for newspaper comic strips: The harsh rules comic books had to submit themselves to functioned more as a demoralizing overarching power (Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 456). Not only for comic books but also for newspaper comics, the introduction of a judge that decided on the quality of the art ended in an overall lack of enthusiasm both by the reader and the willingness of the artists to engage in the process of creating meaningful art. The idea of comics underlying a censorship prevented many artists from forging new paths, and it turned newspaper comics even more into machinery.

Nevertheless, the newspaper comics of the fifties also brought forth some popular strips: Luminary Charles Schulz launched his world famous *Peanuts* in the fifties, which stages a group of children represent-

²⁷ A copy of the code can be found in a German translation in *Comics-Handbuch* by Wolfgang J. Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger (268-69), or on the website of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.

²⁸ It strictly regulated the content of comics on many levels: good should triumph over evil (A6), authorities should be presented with due respect (A3), or criminals should not "be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation" (A5). However, as explicit as some guidelines are, others are not. B1 forbids the use of the terms „horror“ or „terror“ in titles. C4.1 forbids nudity, C5.1 says that, "divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desirable." B3, that says that all "lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated" (Comics Magazine Association of America).

²⁹ The Code was revised in 1971, but it was not loosened.

³⁰ Underground Comix were of course also in line with America's counterculture and the Sexual Revolution of the sixties. Artist such as Carolee Schneemann shocked the world with her feminist happenings, performances like *Interior Scroll* and installations. "Meat Joy," a happening performed in 1964 by eight scantily dressed dancers who wallow in paint and dead fish, symbolized the sexual liberation, an "erotic ritual" (Ursprung 23). Cf. ch. 5.3.3 on Calvin's understanding of art.

ing a microcosm of American society. From that moment on, American culture without Charlie Brown and friends was unthinkable – Watterson describes his work as:

Comic-strip cartooning requires such a peculiar combination of talents that there are very few people who are ever successful at it. Of those, Charles M. Schulz is a league all his own. Schulz reconfigured the comic-strip landscape and dominated it for the last half of its history. One can scarcely overstate the importance of “Peanuts” to the comics, or overstate its influence on all of us who have followed.

By now, “Peanuts” is so thoroughly part of the popular culture, that one loses sight of how different the strip was from anything else 40 and 50 years ago. (“Dark but Gentle World” 83)

With *Peanuts*, the marketing industry of newspaper comic strips entered new levels. The prehistoric world of Johnny Hart, *B.C.*, featuring the simplistic life in the Stone Age with frequent anachronistic references to the American way of life, was launched in 1958.

Also social movements found their way into newspaper comics but never gained wide attention: The Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, for instance, entered comic strips such as *Wee Pals* (1964) by Morrie Turner, who featured the first black protagonist, followed by the less successful *Luther* (1968) by Brumsic Brandon, *Butter&Boop* (1969, by Ed Carrs and Claude Tyler), or *Quincy* (1970) by Ted Shearer (Knigge, “33 Fußnoten” 31). However, under the strict rule of the syndicates, who had full power over the artworks and the merchandizing, newspaper comics could never continue their highly creative beginnings of the early twentieth century.

3.4.2 The Impact of Pop Art

Pop Art took over the art world in the fifties which turned toward the trivial and elevated it to art. Andy Warhol, who regarded himself as a machine producing art and described his studio as “factory,” initiated the full blend of art and commerce. Fully in line with Warhol’s concept of the factory, the replacement of comic strip artists became a common habit. Instead of ending a strip with the retirement of an author, syndicates had the strip continued by other artists. In 1950, *Blondie* was con-

tinued by Jim Raymond; from 1954 on, Capp had assistants helping him out on *Li'l Abner*; in 1951, Bill Perry took over *Gasoline Alley*'s Sunday strips from Frank O'King. The artists became not only service providers, but also literally exchangeable. This trivialization of art led to a rise in commerce in general, and also supported the merchandizing guild that grew around comic strips.

With the post-war era, a shift away from the Modernist art forms toward Pop Art and the postmodern structures impacted the art of the comics graphically. Whereas in the first decades of the twentieth century the drawing style in comic strips had often been influenced by a playful expressionism, abstraction, or fantastical worlds, the drawing style in the post-war era shifted more to the impersonal and functional pop art drawing style with distorted body proportions that are well known in comics today. However, comics also impacted Pop Art, as the works of Roy Lichtenstein show.

Roy Lichtenstein is popular for his large-scale paintings of comics. Although he wanted his images to look as print-like as possible, he always remained a painter. Often he used oil or acrylic as his prime medium to draw the oversized comics. However, his paintings are a parody of the original comics as he uses oil or acrylic paint to adapt the printing techniques on the canvas. He meticulously re-enacted the print effect by creating the individual Ben-Day dots on his canvas (Hendrickson 41). Not only his technique, however, but also the content of his paintings is a parody of the comics. Unlike the often generic faces portrayed in comic books, his large-scale characters have personal facial and emotional features and are parodies of the gender stereotypes of comic books.

Many of his comic adaptations contain war stories, such as his painting "Okay Hot-Shot, Okay!" (1963), and play with aggressive masculinity (Pohl 509). But he also plays with femininity, and many of his comics feature the perfectly beautiful and yet vulnerable damsel in distress. In "Drowning Girl," the thought balloon over the girl drowning in the water reads, "I don't care! I'd rather sink – than call Brad for help!" Her tearful eyes speak of desperation and an inner conflict (Hendrickson 31). This inner conflict is a recurring element in his paintings, as, for instance, in "Eddie-Diptychon" (1962), "I Know... Brad" (1963) or "The Kiss" (1962) (Hendrickson 33, 12, 34). However, for Lichtenstein, his comic adaptations had a different purpose than the comic originals.

Whereas comic books use shapes to “depict,” he rather wanted to make the shapes “intensely unified” (Interview by Swenson 389). Also, in comic strips the images serve the overall depiction and narration, but Lichtenstein aimed at making the individual moment a visual success in composition and unifying the shapes as a whole, playing with the iconographic drawing style of the comics.

From the fifties on, comic strips underwent changes: They became shorter, and “could be read quickly in the accelerated rhythm of contemporary life and did not require the day-to-day commitment of story strips” (Robinson 185). The drawing style became more simplistic with a higher iconographic character, as can be seen in the *Peanuts* characters or in Mort Walker’s comic series *Beetle Bailey*, a comic strip satire about life in the army.

The transition of the drawing style can be seen, for instance, in the comics of *Blondie*, as drawn by Chick Young from 1930 to 1973. In the comic strips published in 1932, the images still contain details such as shadows that give depth to the characters (illustration left). Also the clothes have wrinkles and the head is smaller in relation to the rest of the body (Robinson 120). In her 1968 version (illustration right), her wasp waist looks like Barbie, who was first introduced to the American market in 1959 (Robinson 122). In 1931, Dagwood’s head is more edgy, and, compared to the 1960 version, his eyes are comparatively small. In the sixties, Blondie looks much like the perfectly styled good-looking housewife as presented in the special issue on “The American Woman: Her Achievements and Troubles” (Edelstein).



Also, the immediate rivalry with other visual media shifted newspaper comics more to the fringes of visual culture. With a sudden rise of TV, comics encountered a severe competition with a medium that also operated with images, but was faster and more flashy.

3.5 The Seventies through the Nineties: Bill Watterson in Context

Thanks to the outstanding works of two artists, comic books gained wider attention and acceptance from the late seventies on. Will Eisner wrote *A Contract with God* in 1978, which gained wide recognition, and *Comics and Sequential Art* in 1985. In the latter, he analyzes the genre of graphic novels from an artistic viewpoint and explains how it takes a different reading proficiency to approach graphic novels than other art forms: “The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit” (Eisner 2). Art Spiegelman wrote the graphic novel *Maus*, published in 1991, that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Thus, comic books successfully emancipated themselves as accepted art forms as so-called “Graphic Novels” in the late seventies and eighties.³¹ Comics Studies in general became popular in the seventies, as did studies in popular culture and newspaper comic strips, such as Arthur Asa Berger’s examination of the link between comic strips and American culture in *The Comic-Stripped American* (1973) (as did Fuchs

³¹ The term “graphic novel” was first introduced by Richard Kyle in 1964 in a newsletter published by the Comic Amateur Press Alliance (Zhao 62), but highly popularized by Will Eisner then. Cf. interview with Will Eisner. Though widely adapted and accepted today, the term is misleading, for it suggests that the matter is fictional. As many graphic novels are autobiographies or at least include autobiographical aspects (such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*, or David Small’s *Stitches: A Memoir*, only to mention a few), Hillary Chute alternatively suggested the term ‘graphic narrative,’ as the term “narrative” embraces both fictional and non-fictional literature. She defines it as “book-length work in the medium of comics” (Chute, “Comics as Literature?” 453). There have also been other suggestions, such as “visual narratives” or “pictorial fiction” (cf. Inge, “Comic Art” *Handbook* 81). Despite numerous attempts, the term “graphic novel” has prevailed.

and Reitberger in *Comics: Anatomie eines Massenmediums* in 1973 and Thomas Inge in *Handbook of American Popular Culture*) or the *Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* by Bill Blackbeard in 1979. However, despite first research in newspaper comic strips, the medium itself still maintained the cliché features that still adhere to newspaper comics today. Reduced to the size of a stamp, newspaper comics refrained from diverse and controversial topics, and turned towards a gag-a-day uniformity (Horn 18). The self-understanding of comic artists remained that of commercial artists who merely provide entertainment. When Carl Barks received his first fan letter, he thought it was a joke by his colleagues because he could not believe that someone regarded his work as art (Schikowski 17).³² Even Charles Schulz negated that comics are an art form: The newspaper strip “is not a pure art form” (Interview). However, he went further than most of his colleagues by admitting that although comic strips are not “great art,” they are at least popular art, as he wrote in a resigned and somewhat prophetic commentary in 1969:

I am very proud of the comic strip medium and am never ashamed to admit that I draw a comic strip. I do not regard it as great art, but I have always felt it is certainly on the level with other entertainment mediums which are part of the so-called ‘popular arts.’ In many ways, I do not think we have realized the potential of the comic strip, but sometimes I feel it is too late. Many regard the comic page as a necessary evil and a nuisance, but it is there and it helps sell the newspapers. With a little more tolerance and with a little more dedication on the part of those who create the comics, perhaps we could do better. . . . I really shudder when I read a description of a new feature about to be launched by some newspaper syndicate and they refer to it as ‘off-beat.’ It is time we have

³² Carl Barks is the tragic embodiment of the merchandizing industry of comics: although Barks was one of the three most important artists behind Walt Disney’s Donald Duck universe, he never gained credit for any of his art. Since the comics should be brought in context with Walt Disney, not even the comics carry his signature (Brockmann 6). The other two artists who shaped the Duck universe are Floyd Gottfredson and Al Taliferro. In 2018, the exhibition “Donald, Micky und ihre Väter” shed light on the three artists behind the comics, and the accompanying exhibition catalogue *Gezeichnet Walt Disney? Donald, Micky und ihre Väter* reveals the stories of the almost forgotten artists.

some new features which are ‘on-beat,’ and which are about real people doing real things. (Schulz “Grow” 379)

However, his cautious criticism did not have any impact on the artists and the industry, and the whole strategy of shaping comic strips to fit the merchandizing business increased in the following years.³³ Jim Davis’s *Garfield* (1978-today) is the epitome of the extent merchandizing strategies can reach even today: His strip became widely successful and is today featured in around 2,500 newspapers worldwide with a readership of more than 260 million (Davis). More than fifty people assist Davis in the production of the strip, and *Garfield* can be found on various merchandizing items, such as mugs, key chains, cell phone cases, traveling bags, mouse pads, sunglasses, and many more. With the help of syndicates, many artists tried to sell the comic strips for the biggest profit.

3.5.1 “. . . a syndicate decides which comic strips it thinks it can sell best . . .”: The State of the Syndicates in the Eighties

As the syndicate functions as an intermediary,³⁴ the artists do not interact with the customer, that is the newspaper, but are represented by the syndicate. This structure has not changed since the eighties, although the awareness of artists’ rights has increased. The artists are represented by an institution that regards itself as a business instead of an institution

³³ *Peanuts* is also one of the most merchandized comic strip series. Despite this commercialization, Schulz always insisted to do the artwork of the comic strips himself as it “has given me the opportunity to express many of my own thoughts about life and people. . . . It is interesting to put these adult fears and anxieties into the conversations of the children in *Peanuts*” (Schulz 377).

³⁴ There are artists who work independently, and there are also magazines and newspapers who choose the artists themselves, as, for instance, the *New York Times* (Britannica, “Newspaper Syndicate”). Magazines that pay attention to their graphic appearance, such as *The New Yorker*, also do not work via a syndicate, but often have their own art director (cf. “Wyatt Mitchell”). For the newspapers and magazines that choose to do so, that means of course a much higher financial cost.

shaped by aesthetic ideals, as the public statement from King Features Syndicate reveals:

First, a syndicate decides which comic strips it thinks it can sell best. Then it signs a contract with the cartoonist to create the strips on a regular basis. But most of all, the syndicate edits, packages, promotes, prints, sells and distributes the comic strip to newspapers and other publications around the world. In short, a syndicate is responsible for bringing the cartoons from the cartoonist to the public. (“Submission Guidelines”)

Although the syndicate disburdens the artists to a large extent and spares them time-consuming bureaucracy that comes along with the publication process, the artists find themselves in a trap. They need the help of a syndicate which is oftentimes not interested in representing the artist’s aesthetic standards to distribute his artwork. In addition, the syndicate regards itself as a censorship that “decides which comic strips it thinks it can sell best.” De facto, it has a voice in the artistic process, as Stephan Patis, the artist behind *Pearls before Swine*, describes in an interview. In 2014 he complained how a syndicate he wanted to work for suggested he should replace the rat with a zebra, or make the characters smile more. He refused to agree to these terms because he “just didn’t see the future of the strip as one that was micromanaged” (Patis, “Swine Connoisseur”).

In addition to the dependency on the syndicate, the daily publication is a stressful schedule for the comic artists and can even impact the creativity and quality of a strip. In his guidebook for syndicated comic artists, *Successful Syndication: A Guide for Writers and Cartoonists*, Michael Sedge begins with a chapter on “Realistic Expectations,” where he renders his conversation with artist Charles Kaufman, who quit his job as a syndicated cartoonist. Kaufman explained that syndication

... began to take over my life ... I still do my ‘Fred and Frank’ cartoons for military magazines, but they’re monthly – giving me time to breathe. I couldn’t handle the stress of daily syndication. Your mind is constantly in this cartoon world. Everywhere you go you are thinking about the strip, you carry a note pad around and jot down ideas. At parties I found myself looking and listening for anything and everything that could be developed into visual humor. (Sedge 5)

Kaufman describes how the daily deadlines and the dense schedule turned his dream job into a nightmare, and how the whole production process called for quantity instead of quality. Charles Schulz, who himself experienced that throughout his life, described the artist's lack of time for revision in 1973:

If the cartoonist possesses any sort of artistic or competitive drive, he wants these ideas to get better all the time. Thus he is forced into a rave with others in his field, and it is not one where there is any time for coasting. The strips have to be drawn regardless of what is happening in the cartoonist's personal life. (Schultz [sic], Foreword xiv)

For Schulz, the temporal restriction is what hinders artists from working to their fullest creative and artistic potential and prevents them from improving their own work. Still, he admits: "I have the feeling that there have not been too many comic strip artists who have been successful at doing this, but being very close to the problems perhaps hampers me from being a good judge." Thus, the acceptance of a lower artistic standard has become common among newspaper comic artists. Later, in 2014, Stephan Pastis said, "So I saw that you don't have to draw well if you can write like that. That's a big if, but if you can write like that, you can succeed. . . . My characters still have stick arms and legs. Some people ask me if I did that as a way to evoke Ignatz Mouse, but I didn't know *Krazy Kat* at the time. I did it because it was fast" (Pastis, "Swine Connoisseur"). Apparently, even successful comic strip artists shamelessly come to terms with a lower artistic standard for their works. This area of conflict between productivity and quality, between the pressure of deadlines and creativity, determines the work of the comic strip artists. Bearing this conflict in mind is necessary to comprehend the artists and their work.

Bill Watterson's consequent insistence that newspaper comic strips are to be regarded as an art form was a rarity in the eighties, and his colleagues lacked understanding for his interdiction to merchandize his characters and his withdrawal from the public in the late eighties. His stance and debate about newspaper comic strips as an art form was and still is unique among newspaper comic strips.

3.5.2 “It’s an exceedingly rare privilege to have your work read by people every day, year after year”: Bill Watterson’s Stance on Newspaper Comic Strips

Comics reach an audience of millions, and people from all walks of life. Better yet, and unlike most any other art form, a newspaper comic offers the cartoonist daily contact and a long-term relationship with his audience. I think that this day-in, day-out aspect of the comics gives them surprising power. People invest only a few seconds reading any strip, but the cartoonist can talk to readers for years on end, and that’s an incredible amount of access to people’s minds. It’s an exceedingly rare privilege to have your work read by people every day, year after year. (Introduction 17)

With these words, Bill Watterson summed up the privilege of being a newspaper comic strip artist. *Calvin and Hobbes* was one of those comic strips that has reached millions of enthusiastic readers. *Calvin and Hobbes* is one of the most outstanding newspaper comics: Besides shaping a whole generation of readers, it also impacted many comic strip artists and their work, like Stephan Pastis, Bill Amend, or Jeff Smith (Martell 173). Two things distinguish Watterson from the colleagues of his time: first, his relationship with the syndicate, and second, his obsession with privacy.

“I have no aversion to obscene wealth, but that’s not my motivation either “: Watterson’s “rancorous relationship” with the Syndicate

Watterson’s relationship with the syndicate is described by Lee Salem as “rancorous” (Salem). The rejection of five years full of hard work by different syndicates shaped Watterson’s strong protective attitude toward his artwork and his relationship with the syndicate. In an interview with Christie, Watterson explains how he turned down an offer by United Features before entering a contract with Universal Press because United was more looking for marketing than for the art:

... they saw Hobbes as having marketing potential, so I don’t think that was it. I was later offered the chance to incorporate Robotman into my strip. There they had envisioned a character as a product – toy lines, tele-

vision show, everything – and they wanted a strip written around the character. They thought that maybe I could stick it in my strip, working with Calvin's imagination or something. They didn't really care too how much I did it, just so long as the character remained intact and would be a very major character . . . And I turned them down. It really went against my idea of what a comic strip should be. I'm not interested in slamming United Features here. Keep in mind that at the time, it was the only syndicate that had expressed any interest in my work. I remain grateful for their early attention. But there's a professional issue here. They told me that if I was to insert Robotman into my strip, they would reconsider it, and because the licensing was already in production, my strip would stand a better chance of being accepted. Not knowing if Calvin and Hobbes would ever go anywhere, it was difficult to turn down another chance at syndication. But I really recoiled at the idea of drawing somebody else's character. It's cartooning by committee, and I have a moral problem with that. It's not art then. (Interview Christie 30)

Watterson's hard labor made him cautious about selling the rights of his strip, and when he signed the contract with Universal Press Syndicate, he paid close attention in order to keep the rights over his artwork. He argues,

It's easy to transfer the essence of a gag-oriented strip, especially a one-panel gag strip, from the newspaper page to a T-shirt, a mug, a greeting card, and so on. The joke reads the same no matter what it's printed on, and the joke is what the strip is about. Nothing is lost.

My strip works differently. *Calvin and Hobbes* isn't a gag strip. It has a punchline, but the strip is about more than that. The humor is situational, and often episodic. It relies on conversations, and the development of personalities and relationships. . . . Note pads and coffee mugs just aren't appropriate vehicles for what I'm trying to do here. . . . I have no aversion to obscene wealth, but that's not my motivation either. I think to license *Calvin and Hobbes* would ruin the most precious qualities of my strip and, once that happens, you can't buy those qualities back. (Interview West 68)

Placing the characters on commercial items, he argues, would decontextualize them and would not do them justice. With this criticism, he did not only attack other newspaper comic strip artists who sold their comic strips, but first and foremost the syndicates. The merchandizing industry promised a huge profit for the syndicates and often brought

more money than the distribution to newspapers. Because merchandizing of the characters promised not only another source of revenue but also a higher degree of popularity, Watterson's stance of not allowing the merchandizing of his comic strip characters was extraordinary among artists. However, Watterson was not interested in any offers: "I wanted to draw cartoons, not run an empire, so the offers and requests were not tempting in the slightest," Watterson reflects his attitude in 2005 (14). Especially "noxious" for him was also the idea of turning Hobbes into a toy, as that would ruin his idea of the duality of Hobbes as an animal and a toy: "If I'm not going to answer the question of who or what Hobbes is, I'm certainly not going to let Dakin answer it. It makes no sense to allow someone to make Hobbes into a stuffed toy for real, and deprive the strip of an element of its magic" (Interview West 68). In this respect, Watterson was the only artist of his time to look "at cartoons as an art, as a form of personal expression" ("Cheapening" 98). As was seen earlier, even Charles Schulz, who did not consider newspaper comics as a "pure art form," disagreed with Watterson on his uncommon perspective:

Well, you know, you have an obligation, because this is not a pure art form. You have an obligation not only to the syndicate with which you work, but you have a strong obligation, I think, to the poor salesman out there who's marketing your work, going from newspaper to newspaper and setting up appointments with the hard-hearted editors and trying to sell your work. You have an obligation to a lot of people. If you're Picasso, or Andrew Wyeth, that's all right. But we're not Picasso or Andrew Wyeth. (Interview by Barrier)

Although Schulz, whom Watterson admires, argues that comic strip artists cannot be mentioned in the same breath as realistic painter Wyeth or Picasso, Watterson insists on comics being art. He sarcastically commented on the practice of handing over the entire rights of the comic strip to the syndicate with a cartoon entitled "The Contract," which shows a salesperson handing over a contract to a cartoonist that reads "You give us the whole works – Sign here." The oversized salesman with a fat smirk says, "It's all very standard, I assure you." The cartoon accompanied the publication of his speech "The Cheapening of the Comics" (93).

As many of his colleagues felt attacked by Watterson's seemingly narrow-minded way of condemning the merchandizing apparatus, his speech "The Cheapening of the Comics," which he gave at the Festival of Cartoon Art at Ohio State University in 1989, was the culmination of his criticism. In this speech, he comments on the poor state of newspaper comic strips, and he describes it as "humiliating to read work that was done over 50 years ago and find it more imaginative than what any of us are doing now" (94). He also insists on a larger format of comic strips. He repeatedly complains about the miniature size of newspaper comic strips and fights for a larger format to develop his artistic skills and ideas. The reaction from the audience was divided. Lee Salem, the president of Universal Uclick (the former Universal Press Syndicate where Bill Watterson published his comic strips but merged with Uclick into Universal Uclick in 2009) recalls the reaction of the audience in an interview for the film *Dear Mr. Watterson*:

I think he took a very lofty, at times even philosophical look at the art form. There's nothing wrong with that, because he held himself to those own standards, and I have a lot of respect for him for doing that. . . . Within the crowd, my recollection was that there was a strong split among those who were, "Yeah, go get them. Go tell them the way it is" and the other side, which was, you know, "Who is this kid to tell me how to do my art and do what I want with my life and my business?" (49:32)

Dave Kellett, the artist of *Sheldon* and *Drive* also remembers the speech:

I think it was kind of a brave speech because Mort Walker took it very personally – of "Beetle Bailey" fame – and a few other bigger names in cartooning took it personally, because they viewed it as a shot across the bow of the way they handled their business, the way they handled their cartooning. . . . Watterson was coming out of more of the artistic tradition [sic] and just, "Look, we can raise this art up." And others were coming from, "Look, it has always been this intersection of art and commerce, so you cannot deny that." You know, I've talked to Jeff Smith of "Bone" about it, and he said he literally walked out of that hall and said, "I realize that 'Bone' cannot be what I want it to be in a comic-strip form. I have to forge my own path. I have to take 'Bone' elsewhere." (49:46)

In that respect, the speech struck the nerve at the time and polarized the audience. Eventually, after he returned from his first sabbatical in 1991, Universal agreed on a larger format for the Sunday strips, which offered him the liberty he desired to play with space (Watterson, Introduction 15).³⁵ In his earlier Sunday strips, the syndicate prescribed a certain panel size with the first one to two panels always serving as “throw-away panels”: The newspaper editors could cut it off without doing harm to the overall comic strip if the newspapers offered less space for the Sunday strip. For Watterson, it meant that he had to submit to a most inflexible panel format, which he described as “the tyranny of panels” (*Tenth* 36). Only in 1991, when Watterson insisted on using the full size of the Sunday page freely, did the syndicate eventually grant more space. Although Universal expected several papers to drop the comic strips, “there were virtually no cancellations” (*Sunday Pages* 15). With this new format of the Sunday pages, the format of the *Calvin and Hobbes* book compilation also changed from an upright to a landscape format. The first reprint published in a landscape format was *The Days Are Just Packed* (published in 1993), and featured reruns from 1991 and 1992.

For Universal Press Syndicate, Watterson’s refusal to have the series merchandized meant a tremendous financial loss. Due to *Calvin and Hobbes*’ immense popularity, the merchandizing of the characters would have promised a huge profit. In an interview, Lee Salem reflects on the decision of not buying the complete rights from Watterson:

Our contract with Bill called for us to control the ancillary rights and split revenues with Bill. His words in the tenth anniversary book and, now, this one, relate how unhappy he became over that situation. Our view was that, hey, we’re running a business and this is what you signed. We eventually gave in to him and returned those rights to him. We and our bankers still weep, but our relationship with Bill became more amicable. (Salem)

³⁵ In his interview in 1989, he still said how frustrating the Sunday strips are: . . . you have to waste the entire top third of the strip so that the panels can be dropped or reconfigured for certain-sized newspapers. This really limits what I can do” (Interview West 67).

As they realized that the strip would only continue to be a success if Watterson had the full control over his artwork, Lee Salem and Universal Press Syndicate eventually gave in to Bill Watterson's demands. Watterson also turned down several offers to have *Calvin and Hobbes* animated. When Steven Spielberg contacted the syndicate to present that idea, Lee Salem phoned Watterson to bring this idea forward. But Watterson merely replied: "Why would I want to talk to Steven Spielberg?" He also did not shy away from suing people for the abuse of the copyright, for example, in the early nineties when he sued Aaron Unger, a wholesaler who used *Calvin and Hobbes* logos and images. Unger had to pay \$737,000 to Universal Press Syndicate (Martell 140). Still in 1993, the vending machine seller Seal It Co. illegally printed and sold *Calvin and Hobbes* stickers and was served with a copyright and trademark infringement lawsuit. They had to pay "approximately two times the profit it would have earned if all the stickers had been sold" to the syndicate ("Calvin's Case Settled" 36). *Calvin and Hobbes*, however, is still popular for being a bootleg target today, and the famous decal of Calvin urinating on a logo can still be found on numerous trucks.

Bill Watterson's Obsessive Keeping of Privacy

In 2014, Watterson conducted an interview with Richard Thompson about his series *Cul de Sac*. At the end of the volume, the "Contributor Biographies" are listed. Whereas all the other ten contributors are described in about 3-4 sentences, Watterson's biography only contains the simple sentence, "Bill Watterson drew the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*" (Sparks and Rhode 223). Watterson has obsessively and successfully kept his privacy. His rare public appearances and few photographs lend his person a mysterious aura, as in the case of J.D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon.

Watterson has always been protective about his privacy: Even when he agreed to work as a ghost writer/artist in three comic strips for Stephan Pastis's series *Pearl Before Swine* in 2014, Pastis describes how he suggested phone calls instead of sending emails:

So I proposed working out our technological issues over the phone. But he didn't want to.

At first I thought it was because he didn't own one. Or have electricity. But then I remembered we were emailing.

And so I soon came to the sad realization that he probably just didn't want me to have his phone number. Which was smart. Because I would have called that man once a week for the rest of his life. (Pastis, "Ever Wished")³⁶

Watterson never gave up his privacy and never felt the urge to speak about his private life. When Watterson decided to stop drawing *Calvin and Hobbes* in 1995, his decision came as a surprise to the readership. *Calvin and Hobbes* was the most successful comic strip newspapers carried, and Gary Larson's (who had also been under contract with Universal Press Syndicate) discontinuation of his quirky and very popular cartoon series *The Far Side* in January 1995 meant a severe loss for the world of newspaper comics. Watterson explained his sudden decision in a letter he sent to the editor:

This was not a recent or an easy decision, and I leave with some sadness. My interests have shifted however, and I believe I've done what I can do within the constraints of daily deadlines and small panels. I am eager to work at a more thoughtful pace, with fewer artistic compromises. . . . That so many newspapers would carry Calvin and Hobbes is an honor I'll long be proud of, and I've greatly appreciated your support and indulgence over the last decade. Drawing this comic strip has been a privilege and a pleasure, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity. ("I Will Be Stopping")

There were several reasons leading Watterson to make that decision. First of all, he felt that he had done everything the comic strip allowed

³⁶ In the comic strips Watterson draws, Stephan Pastis meets a little 6-year old second-grader, Libby (short: Lib – almost "Bill" backwards), who claims to do a better job than he. Through the character of Lib, Watterson takes over the strip for 3 days. But then Lib hands the job over back to Pastis: "I'm bored of drawing. Besides, there's a magical world out there to explore." Of course this is a reference to the very last Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, in which both sledge down a hill and Calvin says: "It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol' buddy ... let's go exploring!" (*Magical* 165).

him to do artistically. Due to the newspaper comic strips' repetitive character, he was concerned that his comic strip would wear down and bore the reader if he did not quit early enough:

Obviously, my solution was to pack my bags and sneak out the door, but I was already wondering how many more times could I draw a dinosaur or Spaceman without boring everyone, including myself. It's something every cartoonist has to face. No matter what world you create, its limitations become apparent after a certain amount of time. You need to expand the world, or find a new world, or dig deeper into the existing world . . . something has to change. (Interview Robb 25)

Watterson decided to leave before keeping the strip running only for the sake of having his works published. In his later interview in 2013, he also reflects on the year he ended the strip and describes the driving force behind his decision to stop drawing *Calvin and Hobbes* neither as a burn-out, nor as the result of his discontent about business compromises; instead he described it as the imbalance of the work. He explained:

I was happy with what I had achieved, and the strip's world seemed complete. There's a point at which you realize that doing more doesn't add anything, and may actually make things worse. I didn't want to mow the lawn – just go back and forth over the same ground. Art has to keep moving and discovering to stay alive, and increasingly I felt that the new territory was elsewhere. (Interview Robb 18)

Ending the strip at a time when it enjoyed the highest popularity seemed natural to Watterson. Little is known about his development since – but his work has deeply shaped the world of newspaper comic strips and been a counterpoint to the common newspaper comic strips.

3.6 “I'm guessing that comic strips will lose most of their cultural impact”: Developments after Bill Watterson

After Bill Watterson stopped *Calvin and Hobbes* in 1995, things changed. The turn of the century formed a new turning point in the development of newspaper comic strips. The new century was introduced with the deaths of three American luminaries in the field of comics,

which made room for a new generation of artists: On 12 February 2000, Charles Schulz died, as did Carl Barks on 25 August 2000, and Will Eisner in 2005. Morris, the Belgian artist who drew *Lucky Luke*, died in 2001. But it also marked a change for the comic industry in general. By the turn of the century, Mangas, Japanese comics, flooded the field of comic books. Their unique way of rendering images and new artistic codes made Manga a successful subculture of the comic (Schikowski 20). Graphic novel adaptations of literary works became a common practice and thus changed the reputation of comics as being a serious business; the publisher Classical Comics Ltd. (founded in 2007), for instance, only focuses on publishing graphic novel adaptations of classics (*Classical Comics*). The internet also became a successful platform that initiated the decline of more than just print media and newspapers in general. Due to new technical possibilities of webcomics, the publication and format of comics changed. Recent developments in the distribution of comics and the impact of the internet have been summarized by Dave Kellett in his 15 October 2010 speech, entitled “The Freeing of the Comics.” This speech was given at Ohio State’s Festival of Cartoon Art – the same festival where Watterson gave his speech “On the Cheapening of Comics” in 1989 – and is a deliberate answer to Watterson’s speech (“Dave Kellett”).

But webcomics have also changed the readership, as Watterson stated: “They’re [the readers] plugged into social networks and are constantly bouncing around the Web for a moment’s diversion anyway.” Furthermore, he prophesies, “Newspaper strips were once read by tens of millions of people every single day. . . . I’m guessing that comic strips will lose most of their cultural impact. I’m not criticizing webcomics. . . . I’m just sorry that we’re losing the immense readership, the high incomes that come with that, and the chance to impact the culture” (Interview Robb 29). Particularly with the growing impact of the internet, scholars wonder about the future of printed newspaper comic strips. Horn, for example, raises the question:

Cynics, pointing to the low state of newspaper comics today, as compared to earlier, happier days, when the syndicates were coming out with more trail-blazing strips in one year than they now seem able to do in a decade, might snidely argue that the comics, born in the nineteenth century, will indeed not make it into the twenty-first. I prefer to remain cautiously optimistic: a medium that has weathered all the vicissitudes of

the twentieth century is not likely to disappear overnight. Try as they may, syndicate editors won't be able to kill the comics any more than film producers have been able to kill the movies. So, no cause for celebration perhaps, but a subdued hurrah, and on to the next century. (Horn 19)

Is the interest in newspaper comic strips exhausted after only 100 years of existence? That is difficult to predict, and Schikowski reflects on that question, taking into account the changing face of newspapers:

Auch das Trägermedium ist dabei, sich zu verändern: Von den bedruckten Seiten geht es auf die Bildschirme, und digitales Veröffentlichen ist eines der Zauberworte der Verlage. So sucht eine Form, die am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts entstand, ihren Platz in der Moderne. Es wird sich zeigen, ob zwischen Nostalgie und Tradition genügend Raum für Innovation und Fortschritt bleibt. Der Comic, so scheint es, sucht seine Identität. Oder besser gesagt, er hat endlich zu sich selbst gefunden und kann sich frei entwickeln. Willkommen in der Zukunft! (Schikowski 20)

Of course, the medium of newspaper comic strips is bound to the changing medium of newspapers, which will also determine the future of newspaper comics. When the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* decided to stop the comic strip "Strizz" in 2014 for financial reasons, artists responded to that decision, as, for instance, Hannes Falke who created a comic strip featuring the Yellow Kid and his concern about the state of newspaper comics (Falke).

After large protests from the readership, it was reintroduced in 2015, which shows that comic strips are not necessarily doomed to fall into oblivion. Many online newspapers also decided to publish comics on their website, such as the *Washington Post*. The funnies will survive for sure. Maybe not in the print medium of newspapers – maybe in a smaller circulation or in some new outlet. Welcome to the future.

4 PARAMETERS FOR AN ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER COMIC STRIPS

The success of the first generation of artists, as well as the wide success of *Calvin and Hobbes* and Watterson's stubborn insistence on comic strips as being an art form rather than a commercial product, reveals how newspaper comic strips can be more than talking heads. Just as any art form has certain characteristics and singularities, so do newspaper comic strips. Because not every newspaper comic strip series employs the full range of narrative possibilities, this chapter systematically arranges and analyzes graphic and narrative techniques. Although chapters 4.1 and 4.2 will use comics from *Calvin and Hobbes* to exemplify the techniques, chapter 4.3 offers an analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* in particular and discusses Watterson's use of certain artistic techniques and the effects this has on the reader. The same will then be done in chapter 4.4, which deals with humor in comic strips in general, followed by an analysis of the specific techniques used in *Calvin and Hobbes* (4.5).

In contemporary art, a claim to power is often linked to size. Jeff Koons's oversized garish sculpture "Balloon Dog (Orange)" became not only one of the most significant contemporary works of art, but with a selling price of \$58 million at Christie's in 2013 also one of the most expensive ones, and thus a status symbol ("The Exquisite Process of Jeff Koons"). It is a work of art that claims its significance not through the content it carries, but merely through its immense size. Conversely, one might say that the smaller the work of art is, the less powerful it is. The consequential assumption would be that, due to their miniature size, newspaper comic strips are a weak art form (if they are regarded as an art form at all), and, often enough, newspaper comic strips still seem not to be taken seriously as an art form. Though a restriction in size certainly challenges the artist in his craftsmanship, it does not necessarily indicate a loss of quality in any way. Will Eisner even argued that creating a daily strip is similar to conducting an orchestra in a phone box (qtd. in Knigge, "33 Fußnoten" 29). Due to these spatial restrictions, the

artists need to use space wisely in populating it – whole worlds need to work in a space hardly larger than the size of a stamp. That generic restriction in space makes not only the creation of a comic strip an entirely different creative process, but also requires keeping different artistic parameters in mind when analyzing a comic strip.

In *Writing Genres*, Devitt argues that “genre necessarily and simultaneously both constrains and enables writers and that such a combination of constraint and choice is essential to creativity. . . . [C]reativity theory suggests that creativity derives from constraint as much as freedom, giving genres a significant role in making choices possible” (Devitt 138). Each art form is subject to different constraints, and knowing them and moving within these boundaries is what offers the artist the greatest possible artistic freedom. This, however, depends heavily on whether constraints are regarded as a chance or a confinement. The artist needs to be familiar with them to make the medium’s characteristics work for his purpose. Bill Watterson himself claimed that he grew up with comic strips, and that this was the language he learned to speak. His comic strips reveal how he internalized the language of the genre (Interview Robb 8). Only a full awareness of the medium’s qualities will enable an artist to create art at its best.

This chapter sets out to explore these characteristics of the genre. The unique narrative and artistic techniques show the fundamental differences of newspaper comic strips to other forms of comics, as Richard Witek points out: “While comic strips and comic books are both manifestations of the sequential art medium and both share a common narrative vocabulary and grammar, they diverge so fundamentally as to constitute different literary forms” (Witek 6).¹ Thus, newspaper comic strips need to be handled in a way that does justice to their narrative rhythm.

This chapter sets out to discuss the essential parameters for the analysis of comic strips in order to provide a toolbox with which one can

¹ Witek, however, makes the very mistake he tries to warn the reader of: He draws an immediate comparison between newspaper comic strips and comic books in which newspaper comic strips get the short end of the stick. He concludes that due to all the constraints laid upon them, they are not harmful, but also more of an “unbidden” and “supplementary feature” that can be nothing more than a gag strip. For Witek, apparently, their constraints are too numerous to allow them to bring forth meaningful art.

approach newspaper comic strips.² In his work *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), Will Eisner pioneered analyzing the artistic value of comics, and in his introduction, he defines the character of the language of ‘sequential art’:

The regimens of art (eg. [sic.] perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regiments of literature (eg. [sic.] grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. . . . In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art. (8)

Eisner argues that the analysis of comics draws both on art theory and literary theory. Paying due attention to the hybridity of the genre, this chapter is subdivided into sections on the graphic and the narrative aspects of comic strips that together form the symbiosis of the semiotic codes of comics.

The first part, devoted to the graphic techniques of newspaper comics, roughly draws from Will Eisner’s 1985 work *Comics and Sequential Art*. This book first advanced a serious analysis of the artistic value of comics. Although he claims to include both graphic novels and newspaper comic strips, as a graphic novel artist his writing naturally focuses more on comic books and neglects the features unique to newspaper comic strips (5). Still, there are techniques that can also be applied to newspaper comic strips, and his approach to comics is helpful in so far as he draws from his experience as an artist. The overall choice of parameters, however, derives from my own reading of newspaper comics as an art form and experiences in the world of illustration. The second part discusses the narrative scope in newspaper comic strips. The chapter draws on literary theory, and is structurally loosely based on Jeremy

² The only attempt was undertaken by Robert Harvey in 1994, who set out to distinguish four tools for analyzing newspaper comic strips: “narrative breakdown, layout, panel composition, and style” (7). Narrative breakdown refers to the division of narrative units; layout, panel composition and style all refer to the graphic aspects of the comic strip. This, however, is only a broad and sketchy division that I will specify.

Hawthorn's *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*. The following chapters show how Hawthorn's work takes into account different narrative layers in novels, and how his methodology helps to grasp the potential of the narration in the comic strip. Multiple examples from other comic strip series will be provided to illustrate a full range of possibilities which newspaper comics are capable of. Although the first part is strictly divided into graphic and narrative parameters, the comprehensive study of *Calvin and Hobbes* in the last part reveals how interdependent and interwoven the two sign systems are and how they truly melt into one sign system in comics.

I will begin with the general layout and the panel composition which refers to the inner graphic arrangement of the scene, and then set out to analyze the possibilities of character design, the impact of the background and props, and finally the typographical possibilities.³

4.1 Graphic Features

4.1.1 Layout: The Panel Frame

The first graphic element that defines (newspaper) comics is the panel, or rather the frame that surrounds the panel. Though often not regarded as an artistic device, it plays an essential role for the strip, which is also the reason why some scholars have argued that the panel/frame is one of the defining parameters for a comic strip (Cf. Grünewald, *Comics* 15; Knigge, "33 Fußnoten" 9). Traditionally, the panel frame is painted as a thin black box. It defines an 'inside' and an 'outside' for the story, and it allocates a stage, a place where the story takes place.⁴ Everything inside the box is necessary to understand the story; everything outside of it is wasteland and plays no role in the narration. With an irregular shape of the panels or no panel at all, the eye lacks a clear guidance to read. A comic strip without the frame is hard to read because the eye gets easily

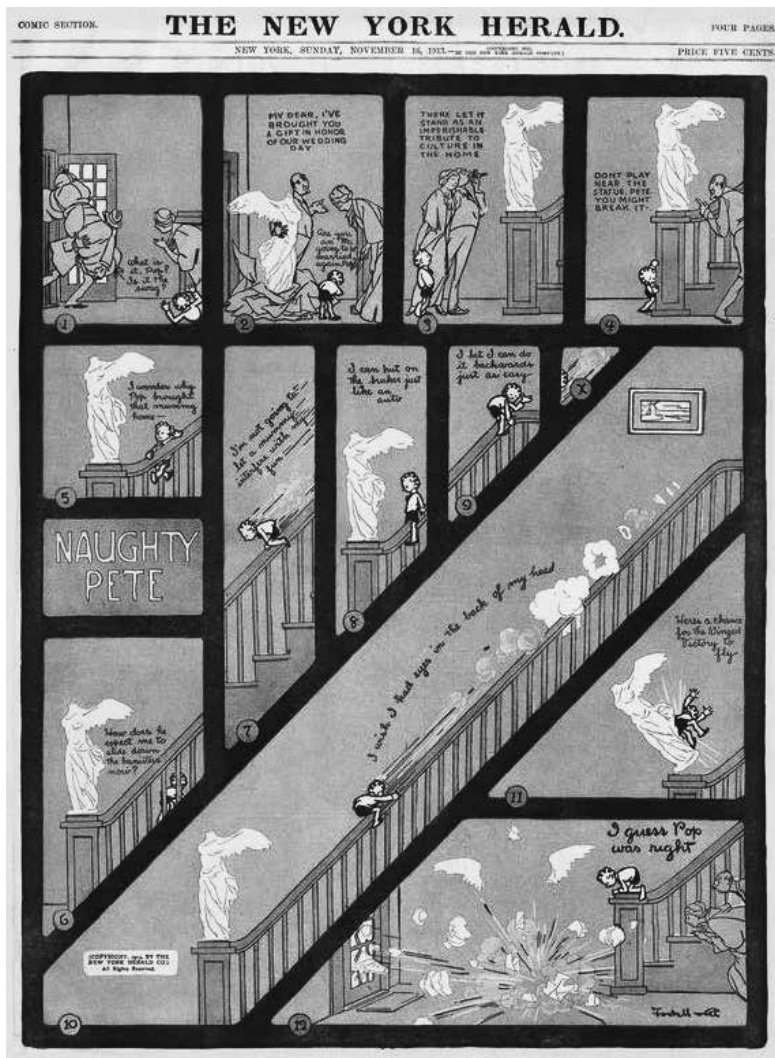
³ One essential graphic facet of newspaper comic strips is the coloring. Since, however, the regular dailies are printed in black and white and usually only the Saturday strips are colored, I will not take the color into account.

⁴ This shows how closely the graphic and narrative forms are intertwined and that they cannot fully be regarded separately.

lost in the overlapping images that are not clearly separated from one another; the clear distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is removed. Therefore, the panel is the most integral part of the comic strip to define the stage where the narration is happening.

However, graphically, the panels are more than merely the definition of a stage. The panel can also become a “part of the creative process” for artists (Eisner, *Sequential Art* 38). The first artist to take a creative approach toward panel frames was Charles Forbell in his series *Naughty Pete*. Although Forbell was an unknown artist at that point, his comic strip appeared on the front page of the *New York Herald* in 1913. In each comic strip, Naughty Pete is in a situation in which he intentionally disobeys his parents’ advice, and each comic strip ends the same way: Of course, Pete gets the short end of the stick, and in the last panel he always admits, “I guess Pop was right.” With each comic strip, Forbell seems to reinvent a new panel arrangement. When Naughty Pete is chased by a cat in the comic strip published on 24 August 1913, the panels have an oblong format to adjust the form to the content and the motif of the chase to visualize how Pete flees from the cat (Braun 137). In a comic published on 16 November 1913, Naughty Pete slides down a stair railing although his parents forbid him to do so (Braun 146). The main panel in which Pete slides down runs diagonally from the top right to the bottom left and is adjusted to the shape of the staircase. All the other panels are carefully arranged around the main panel thereby breaking with the traditional rectangular format of panels (see: page 96).

George Herriman, the author of *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944) frequently uses panels that lead an existence independent from the story. Apart from the storyline and the often subtle linguistic humor, the series is known for a rather unconventional and creative use of panels and their unexpected shapes. However, whereas Forbell mostly uses panels schematically, Herriman’s use is more Dadaistic: He creatively integrates the panel form into his artworks – he adds panels within panels, chooses unusual forms for the panel (as, for example, an L-shape), slopes the panels, leaves out the frame altogether, or even actively includes panels and lines in his narration. In his comic of 21 July 1918, Herriman uses

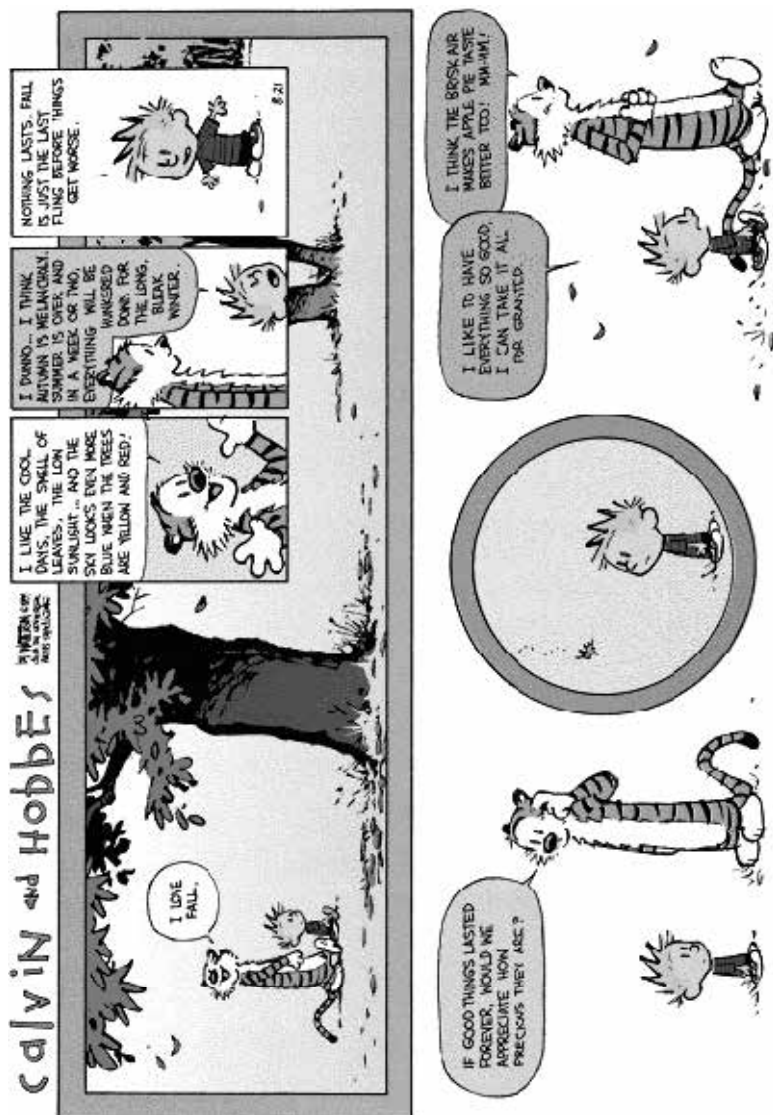




a horizontal line (that usually defines the frame of the panels) as an active element in his plot: "Perhaps one of the finest portrayals of an horizontal line ever published – perhaps" (McDonnell et al. 134; see: p. 97). In the comic, the "finest" horizontal line serves as a visual representation of the relationship of Ignatz and Krazy Kat: Ignatz Mouse is above, Krazy Kat below. At the end of the strip, the mouse cuts the line and both now appear on top of the line. However, since Herriman omits the panel frame altogether and does not use any background to frame the story, the line has a confusing effect on the reader. His story is open and seems to have no context. It takes place in a vacuum with no reference to who put the line there, and to why and how it can be penetrated. This unexplained element is the driving force in the comic and purposefully creates an alienation effect. By breaking up the conventional use of the panels, this comic strip is harder to read than comics with a regular and clearly defined panel shape.

For Bill Watterson, the panel also serves as a visual device to support the narration. This can be seen in the later Sunday strips when the syndicate granted more space to Watterson. He described the benefit of having more space that "Sunday strips lend themselves to longer conversations or visual things or, best of all, both" (Interview West 62). In those strips he does not only play with the panel format (using round panels, panels within panels, or panels with unusual shapes that can even extend over a full page), but he arranges the panels to create a coherent piece of art, often adding a panel frame color to create a mood for the overall comic strip.

In a Sunday strip where Calvin and Hobbes muse about fall and how things do not last forever ("If good things lasted forever, would we appreciate how precious they are?"), the first panel with the landscape stretches over the full page with an ochre-colored frame to enhance the mood of fall (*Magical* 124; see: p.99). Watterson foregoes the traditional sequence of panels, but the following three panels overlap with the first panel, which functions like a background. The overlapping panels create a sense of simultaneity and timelessness as the narration is not bound to the traditional sequence of images. The focus of the entire strip, however, is on the round panel in the middle of the lower page. It is a wordless panel with a similar colored frame: As there is no background in the panel but only green color, the attention is on Calvin who quietly observes a leaf falling to the ground. As the other two neighboring panels



have no frame and a white background, the panel is set apart visually and floats in the void of the other two panels. The entire panel arrangement reflects the mood of the contemplation of fall and the melancholy of transitions and of time.

However, more space of course also allows larger panels to develop full landscapes and a complete setting. The panel, though it traditionally merely serves the purpose of defining the artist's stage, can take a very active and creative role within the comic strips and can actively support the storyline.

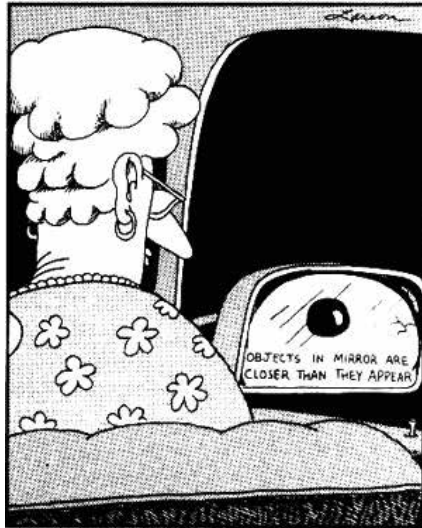
4.1.2 Panel Composition

Since comics use cinematographic elements in the same way as a film with regard to the composition of panels, film analysis and comic analysis share the same vocabulary in that field. Panel composition deals with the layout, the camera angle and perspective within the panel, and comics can play with different viewpoints (or camera angles) and zooms.

There are two features unique to the panel composition in newspaper comic strips. First of all, space in newspaper comic strips is limited. Will Eisner examines how perspective itself has an impact on the narration and the reader as, for example, the "worm's eye" perspective "evokes a sense of threat" in the reader, and how the bird's eye perspective can create in the reader a "sense of detachment" (*Sequential Art* 90). Though newspaper comics are capable of playing with perspective, it is a mode that devours space and complicates the reading process. The use of multiple perspectives in one comic strip is not common, as the readers of the newspaper comic need to be able to grasp the comic strip quickly. Comic strips in which the reader has to imagine himself into a new perspective with each panel impede the reading process. Also, a shift in perspective puts the reader into a new relation to the narration, as Will Eisner shows (90). Instead of being a neutral observer of a scene, the reader can become emotionally involved in the events merely by a shift in perspective.

There are two different possibilities of shifting in perspective: vertically and horizontally. The more frequent shift of perspective occurs on the horizontal level. However, the range of distance is usually short in

comic strips. As long-distance shots are mainly used to introduce a setting, they are seldom used in comic strips because, due to their shortness, comic strips usually start *in medias res* and focus on the characters and the plot instead of on the overall setting. Therefore, artists often indicate the background with a few strokes and only draw the props that are necessary to understand the strip, but refrain from drawing whole sceneries and settings. An extreme close-up is equally difficult: Due to the often overly reduced painting style, the image would be too abstract and therefore hardly readable. Gary Larson occasionally plays with close-ups of eyes to create a humorous effect. The eye in the side mirror of the car is simply indicated by a black circle with a blank spot to indicate the watery reflection of the eye, and a small zigzag line indicating a vein. Extreme close-ups often need a context: The inscription on the mirror, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," prepares the reader for the close proximity of what is in the mirror (Larson, *Far Side* 2 159, see p. 101). Without the inscription, the image would be nearly impossible to read, because the artistic reduction impedes an understanding of the close-up of the eye.



The other option to play with perspective is on the vertical level. A shift on the vertical level is mostly done when the reader is supposed to view something from another character's perspective. In Gary Larson's cartoon "How Birds See the World," he plays with the vertical perspective to offer the reader a perspective of a bird: The punch line lies in the fact that birds see human beings and animals from above as bull's eyes instead of as normal heads (*Far Side* 2 178, see p.102).



How birds see the world

At times, artists use a high angle perspective throughout their entire comic strip. In *Cul de Sac* by Richard Thompson, a series about the life of four-year-old Alice Otterloop in an American suburb, Thompson uses a high angle perspective quite frequently, thus assuming that the reader is looking down on the characters. It creates the effect of the reader observing a small world from the outside, as in a puppet show in which the characters appear even more naive and myopic (Thompson, *Exit* 83).

The same use of the high camera angle can be seen in the *Non Sequitur* strip by Wiley Miller: The reader seems to observe the setting from a high perspective, looking down on the world of follies, feeling superior not only intellectually, but also graphically.

Bill Watterson's use of perspective is unique in so far as he does not draw from one angle only, but uses perspective in a cinematographic sense with frequent perspective shifts and zooms.

4.1.3 Character Design Incl. Facial Expressions/Gesture

The visualization and the design of characters play an integral role for the success of a comic series. Novels have to rely on the written word to describe characters, which can leave questions of the visual appearance unanswered. When J. K. Rowling cast black actress Noma Dumezweni for the role of Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, the public reaction was ambiguous. Rowling, however, insisted on

Dumézweni being the best actress for the role and argued that nothing in the Harry Potter books says that Hermione cannot be black (Ratcliffe). This shows that written texts can conceal the physical appearance of a character, although the readers might not even be aware of it. Everything the reader should know has to be explicitly said by the writer. Percy Lubbock picked up the concept of distinguishing between showing and telling in fiction and emphasizing the importance of showing for the fiction writer as first examined by Henry James. In *The Craft of Fiction* (1921 [1955]), Percy Lubbock says that

[the author's] sole thought is how to present the story, how to tell it in a way that will give the effect he desires, how to show the little collection of facts so that they may announce the meaning he sees in them. . . . [T]he art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself. (Lubbock 62)

Just as Henry James favors representation over stating,⁵ Lubbock argues that the “story stands obediently before the author” and has to be shown (Lubbock 62).

In comics, the story naturally comes to the reader through showing, not through telling. The images show the reader not only the character's physical appearance, but also their actions, which are rarely commented on. It is left to the readers to make up their mind about the characters.

And yet, the character development in comic strips is not entirely independent – even their design is often submitted to the rules of spatial restriction and the graphic reduction. Since the panels commonly have a square format, the naturally tall human body shape is often distorted in its proportion to be more compatible with the panel format. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson remarks that disproportions are the tool of the caricaturist:

⁵ Cf. *The Art of the Novel. Critical Prefaces*: “. . . processes, periods, intervals, stages, degrees, connexions, may be easily enough and barely enough named, may be unconvincingly stated, in fiction, to the deep discredit of the writer, but it remains the very deuce to *represent* them, especially represent them under strong compression and in brief and subordinate terms; . . .” (94).

The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this [the distortion], at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it. . . . He realises disproportions and deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations, but which have not succeeded in coming to a head, being held in check by a higher force. . . . Certainly, it is an art that exaggerates . . . (26)

The bodily distortion turns the illustration of a living human being into a caricature. In the same way, comic strips' characters always play with disproportions, thus lending them a humorous look (see illustration below. Illustration by author).

Many comic strip characters have a short torso, short extremities and an oversized head, which gives them a squarish shape. The oversized head offers chances to express emotions through mimics. In art, a character's proportions are traditionally measured in relation to the head. Whereas naturally the proportions of an adult are eight head lengths (meaning that the total length of the body is eight times the length of the head), and that of a child about four head lengths, the proportions of comic characters are usually different. The body proportion of Calvin, for instance, is only about 2 head lengths, which makes his head almost larger than the rest of his body (even the proportion of the body of a new-born baby in relation to the head is approximately three head lengths), thereby exaggerating even the well-known scheme of cuteness associated with children (large eyes, large forehead, low facial expressions ...). The disproportional character design can be seen in one *Calvin and Hobbes* strip when Calvin turns into x-ray man: Watterson paints Calvin's skeleton (*Author* 22).⁶ This graphic exaggeration makes comic



⁶ In *The Tenth Anniversary Book*, an annotated edition of selected comic strips, Watterson comments on the strip, "Calvin's proportions make for a bizarre skeleton" (43).

characters often look cute.⁷ There are more graphic options other than downscaling the proportions to make the character fit into a panel. In *Garfield*, for example, Jon the cat owner is rather tall, and he is hardly ever seen full length, but always behind a table. To bring the cat Garfield and Jon on the same height level, Garfield lives on a table instead of staying on the ground.

The more realistic the author wants to render a strip, the more the artist stays true to body proportions – the more distorted the proportions (not only the body in relation to the head – but also the bigger mouth, nose ...), the more comical the character. *The Adventures of Tintin*, the Belgian adventure comic book series, works with fairly realistic proportions, as does, for instance, Lynn Johnston's family strip *For Better or For Worse*. Here, the drawing style corresponds with the overall message of the comic: The title refers to the part of the marriage vows "... for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, ..." and the comic realistically wants to depict the beauty of the good days, but also the hardships of family life. A realistic drawing style corresponds to the overall message, but also makes the panel design more challenging. Therefore, Lynn Johnson works with medium close-ups where the reader does not see the whole body, but only the upper half of it, leaving room to see enough of the facial expressions and the gestures, but not enough to see the whole posture. Thus, the panels appear crammed because the reader usually gets to see only a segment of the whole setting or the whole character, which can at times appear as if Lynn Johnston was struggling with the small panel format.

The distorted bodies do not only make the characters fit into the panel, they also add a humorous effect to the visual presentation of the characters. In his documentary on visual comedy, *Laughing Matters*, Rowan Atkinson points out the importance of body shape and the body size. In real-life comedy, when it is not possible to play with body proportions as such, the size of clothes can take over that role and become an "essential means of expression" to create that humorous effect and to make it appear as if one was playing with distorted body proportions:

⁷ Therefore the merchandizing of comic characters works so well: Even costumers who have not read the *Peanuts* might be inclined to buy items with the *Peanut* characters printed on them simply because they look cute.

The comedian may be lucky enough to possess the kind of body people laugh at: a short fat one, or a tall thin one. But a normal, attractive body is not necessarily a handicap. It is what you can do with your body that is important. . . . Even when the comedian is wearing normal clothes, it is rare that they will fit perfectly. They are likely to be slightly too small, or slightly too big. Psychologically, these small variations can be very significant for the performer and the audience. The character in the big clothes is likely to be a completely different person from the character in the small clothes. ("Pt. 1" 3:15)

Body proportions are the essential visual tool to lend the character a certain personality. Small podgy people appear rather happy and good-natured, whereas tall and lanky people appear more clumsy and uncertain.

A smaller torso and an oversized head grant the artist more space to play with facial expressions. Since the focus is less on the surrounding setting and more on the character, facial expressions reveal the emotions and thoughts of a character. Facial expressions are like wordless thought bubbles; they mirror thoughts. Watterson worked hard to portray a wide range of facial expressions in the characters of his series, which is especially overt in the design of Calvin: His head is oversized, and his face covers a wide range of emotions, such as astonishment, consternation, despair, tiredness, or anger.

Whereas mimics can hint toward the thoughts of a character, text in thought bubbles is less subtle in conveying thoughts. This is the beauty of the medium, made possible by its hybrid character: It neither need say everything, nor does it have to show everything graphically. It can adjust the two different languages of text and image wherever they fit better. In earlier comic strips, artists still felt the urge to write out more – *Pogo* by Walt Kelly or Frank O. King's *Gasoline Alley*, for instance, are very text-laden. However, comic strips can also choose to omit text altogether and just work graphically. In these cases, it is mostly the ambiguity of facial expressions and gestures that form the climax of a strip. e.o. plauen's German strip *Vater und Sohn*, for example, shows how whole stories and even dialogues can be told only through images. Though it appears to be very simplistic and illiterate, this form of representation can be more challenging because the reader is not told about the emotions discursively. Instead, the reader has to observe the characters and

interpret the feelings that are often not as explicit as words (cf. Eisner, *Sequential Art* 24).

In the *Calvin and Hobbes* strip, no words are needed to explain the entire strip: The whole strip works graphically. Conveying silence is also a modern narrative technique, as, for instance, used by Samuel Beckett.⁸ The focus is on Calvin's mimic: It is the transition from the innocent and stoic expression in the first panel when the reader still does not know what to expect, to a focused expression when Calvin opens the umbrella in the third panel. The turning point occurs in the last panel and can be seen in Calvin's joyful facial expression as he diverts his umbrella from its intended use into a paddling pool (*Indis* 63).

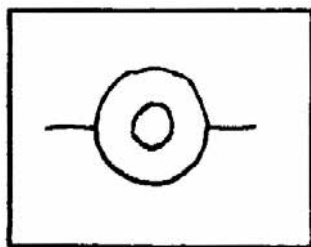


One other feature with regard to character design is graphic oversimplification.⁹ Often the characters are drawn with clear contours, and unnecessary details are omitted. The strip needs to be easy to read; therefore too many details can easily be confusing – especially since the dailies are usually printed in black and white. The graphic reduction is an immense artistic challenge, because the image still needs to be readable, but the characters also need to have distinct graphic characteristics. However, this oversimplification can also include a graphic trap: The viewer needs enough information to make sense of the image. So-called “doodles” are popular and entertaining riddles because

⁸ In *Waiting for Godot*, one text by Estragon, for instance, reads, “(step forward). You’re angry? (Silence. Step forward). Forgive me. (Silence. Step forward. Estragon lays his hand on Vladimir’s shoulder.) Come, Didi. (Silence.) Give me your hand. (Vladimir half turns.) Embrace me! (Vladimir stiffens.) Don’t be stubborn! (Vladimir softens. They embrace” (16-17). For Beckett, silence is an intentional device.

⁹ Of course, this is true for the entire panel composition and not only for the character design. However, the oversimplified design of the character sets the visual tone of the comic strip.

they show an oversimplified abstract situation often from an unusual perspective (see: illustration p. 108. This, of course, is a cowboy riding a bicycle. Voolaid). Graphic reduction can, on the one hand, become hard to read but, on the other hand, it can have a comic effect. In the same way, the characters ought not be so oversimplified that they become graphically unintelligible.



In *FoxTrot*, for instance, the characters are graphically reduced to such an extent that they resemble one another. All the characters have identical and very simplified facial expressions (a mouth that is only a sausage-shaped oval form with a grid indicating the teeth, a circle indicating a nose, and two white circles with tiny black dots as eyes) and can only be distinguished through their clothes and hair, which, in consequence, need to be distinct and need to remain fairly the same throughout the series to make the characters recognizable.¹⁰ Though father Roger is apparently much older than his children, his skin does not display any signs of wrinkles or age (Amend). This graphic reduction often becomes a matter of personal taste. The oversimplification is what makes people often think that comic strips are crude art, which certainly is true for some artists. This, however, is a judgment left to the taste of the reader.¹¹

Gesture and posture are supportive elements for characters, of which Eisner even says they “occupy a position of primacy over text” (*Sequential Art* 103). Gesture is what usually brings characters to life. Gestures can – like mimics – reveal the inner thoughts of a character; they reflect an attitude. The following examples show how gestures

¹⁰ This, by the way, is true for most comic strips. Usually, the characters always wear the same clothes in order to have a higher recognition value.

¹¹ However, these assumptions are not always farfetched. In an interview, Stephan Pastis, for instance, freely admitted his deficit in artistic skills: “Part of the reason I chose Dilbert is because, like me, Scott Adams didn’t draw that well, yet he succeeds wildly. So I saw that you don’t have to draw well if you can write like that. That’s a big if, but if you can write like that, you can succeed” (Pastis, “Swine Connoisseur”). However, the question of the quality of art and aesthetic is a different field of research.

alone add a whole new meaning to a setting even when the spoken words remain the same (illustration by author). Whereas the gesture of the person in example (1) shows excitement by holding the hands in the face, the hands on the hips of the person in (2) shows scepticism. The kneeling in awe in (3) shows admiration, and the laid-back sitting on the chair in (4) shows relaxed enjoyment. A gesture can even become ironic by saying the opposite to the spoken words as in (5). Whereas the mere words express admiration, the defensive gesture shows rejection.



Also the degree of mobility can say something about a character. The figures in *Dilbert* do not use vibrant gestures at all; instead, the characters seem to be static and inflexible. A lack of joints (knees, elbows) hinders the characters from moving naturally but makes them look clumsy. Again, when used skilfully, a lack of gesture can also be an outward reflection of an inner narrow-mindedness and inflexibility, even to a degree that they appear simplistic and lifeless. Moe, for instance, the school bully in *Calvin and Hobbes*, displays less agile gestures than the rest of the cast – he has no neck (his torso seems to turn right into his head), and he has an overall big body. As he does not move a lot, he appears clunky. Also, as his hair covers his eyes, the emotions usually conveyed through the eyes are hidden to the reader, making him look lifeless.

One unique feature of newspaper comic strip characters is their use of animal characters. In written prose, the protagonists are mostly human beings. As language always fixates, there is a clear distinction between animals and human beings. Although there are novels that have animals as protagonists (such as Jack London's *Call of the Wild*), usually humans and animals do not intermingle. Images, however, can easily abandon the categories of animals and human beings. Therefore, they redefine the dual understanding of the human and the animalistic world and enter a new territory for narration by uniting the organic world. For the narration in newspaper comic strips, this mingling of

animal and human characters has become an essential feature, as most newspaper comic strips either feature animals alone or feature human beings and animals. Watterson explains that an anthropomorphic animal offers more latitude for the comic strip: “You know, you can draw a penguin on a toilet reading *The New York Times* and it’s adorable, but try doing it with an adult male character, and it’s disgusting” (Interview West 65). Often, comic strips feature all sorts of animals that communicate with each other without any language barrier: *Pogo* features a possum, an alligator, an owl, a dog, a turtle, and many more. The reader gains insight into the world of animals, a world that is naturally not accessible to human mind.

Therefore, animals in comic strips mostly carry anthropomorphic features, and their anatomy resembles the human body. Hobbes stands on his hind legs and walks and moves like a human, as does Snoopy in *Peanuts*, Garfield, or the group of animals in *Pearl before Swine* by Stephan Pastis. *Get Fuzzy* by Darby Conley is a series in which the difficulties of the different proportions of the protagonists can be seen: The protagonists’ different body proportions create empty space that Conley partly fills with speech balloons.

4.1.4 Background/Props

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner says that “background art is more than mere stage setting, it is a part of the narration” (23). In newspaper comic strips, the setting itself plays a role for the narration, but the background props used to indicate the setting are usually kept at a minimum. Due to the limited size, graphic simplification is an integral part not only for character design, but also for the overall setting and the props. Whereas a photo captures every detail, even the ones the photographer does not intentionally see (Walter Benjamin describes it as the “optical unconscious”¹²), the comic strip needs to get rid of all that does not serve the story of the comic strip.

¹² “Es ist ja eine andere Natur, welche zur Kamera als welche zum Auge spricht; anders vor allem so, daß an die Stelle eines vom Menschen mit Bewußtsein durchwirkten Raums ein unbewußt durchwirkter tritt. Ist es schon üblich, daß einer, beispielsweise, vom Gang der Leute, sei es auch nur

As mentioned in the chapter about “panel composition” and “character design,” the comics primarily focus on the portrayal of characters and less on the background. Due to the focus on character and plot, the background is at times adjusted to the narration. Bill Watterson uses the background to serve the plot: “. . . I try to make the drawings as interesting as I possibly can, given the very limited constraints of the format. In other words, if I’ve got essentially two characters talking in a daily, I’ll try to put them in an interesting location, have them walking through the woods. I’ll try different perspectives” (Interview West 62). To philosophize about life, Calvin and Hobbes often wander outside in the woods or wildly speed down the hill with a soapbox or a sledge.

At times, the background may not even be drawn consistently. The house Calvin lives in has recurring architectural elements and furniture which always fit the individual panel: Yet it would be impossible to reconstruct the whole house – the location of the kitchen, the living room with the fireplace, or the door that leads into the backyard. The setting only serves to support the individual panel. However, this does not necessarily weaken the comics. For newspaper comic strips, it is more important to make the individual panel composition visually successful than to create a consistent world; the background plays a subordinate role. In order to create a recognition value, artists often play with few recurring props, which then allows a greater degree of abstraction as the reader expects certain props. Snoopy, for instance, can often be found on his little doghouse which is sometimes only indicated with a horizontal line, although the line itself could also indicate a table or the horizon. However, since the reader knows that Snoopy is frequently on the roof of his little doghouse, the reader reads the horizontal line automatically as the top of the roof. Therefore, it is also common among artists to draw cartoon characters with only four fingers: As the characters, and thus their hands, are reduced in size, four fingers are essentially

im groben, sich Rechenschaft gibt, so weiß er bestimmt nichts mehr von ihrer Haltung im Sekundenbruchteil des ‚Ausschreitens‘. Die Photographie mit ihren Hilfsmitteln: Zeitlupen, Vergrößerungen erschließt sie ihm. Von diesem Optisch-Unbewußten erfährt er erst durch sie, wie von dem Triebhaft-Unbewußten durch die Psychoanalyse” (“Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” 371).

enough to express every gesture (one exception being, of course, counting to five).

This is, of course, only a rough rule of thumb which does not apply to all comics,¹³ especially since the sparse interior of the panels became more popular in the second half of the twentieth century. Artists in the early stages of newspaper comics paid more attention to background details. Walt Kelly in *Pogo*, for example, uses more detail, depth, and perspective by using more shadows, adding more details (e.g., individual leaves on a tree or blades of grass, etc.) and in his use of props, such as a little burning candle or the individual parts of a watch chain. Each one of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* comics can be called a visual firework and is loaded with architectural and fantastical details. *Little Nemo in Slumberland* heavily depends on detailed backgrounds and the charm of the magical world. These details make the reading process a different one: The reader lingers more on one panel to grasp the whole picture and its details instead of skimming through the panels. Gradually, newspaper comics have disengaged themselves from this tradition. The master of graphic reduction is Charles Schulz, who started drawing the *Peanuts* in 1950 and shaped half a century of newspaper comics. His images contain no surplus graphic information and detail, his brushstrokes are thin and shaky lines, and at times his comics appear as if they were still sketches. The more the narration and the level of graphic complexity correspond with each other, the more coherent the comic becomes.

4.1.5 Lettering

Lettering is a feature unique to comics – no other art form has that intersection of art and text. Will Eisner says that “text reads as an image,” and that lettering “treated ‘graphically’ and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. . . . [I]t provides the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound” (10). Lettering is a means to visualize the emotions usually carried through tone.

Watterson rarely plays with typographic techniques. His visuals are strong, so he deliberately keeps the lettering simple to have the text not

¹³ *For Better or For Worse* often renders more details.

stand as an immediate competitor to the image. Nevertheless, there are multiple ways to play with lettering. There is a primary division into two typographic categories: Either the text is handwritten or it is printed. The latter is less common and widely avoided, because it creates an effect of inconsistency between the hand-drawn images and the accuracy of the computer-generated fonts, but it can at times also be integrated on purpose. Gary Larson intentionally uses both written lettering and computer fonts. He uses hand-lettered text within the panel in the speech balloons, whereas outside the panels he uses a regular computer font to indicate the narrator's voice (e.g. Larson, *Far Side* 3 179). This creates two narrative layers and sets the narrative voice apart from the characters' statements, not only in terms of content, but also by the choice of the font, and makes his text look more objective and credible than a handwritten text.¹⁴ A blend of both is still rarely used.

There are some typographical parameters that are relevant for the lettering in comic strips:

1. Typeface: What font does the artist choose? Is the text italicized or bold? Also, is it serif or sans-serif? Handwritten fonts are mostly sans-serif, which is the natural character of handwriting and eases the reading process. Is it a simplistic font or does it have twirls as the famous Walt Disney writing that is harder to read, but looks playful and humorous?

2. Capitalization: Does the author use merely capitalized letters (as it is very common for comics), or also lower case letters? Using only upper case letters creates a consistency in height, thereby making the text graphically compact. Using lower case letters inevitably creates a visually irregular appearance by using not only one regular height, but extending the regular x-height of a font with ascenders and descenders to the cap height and descender height.

3. Vertical/horizontal scaling: Is the text tall or thick and bulgy? A round and bulgy font looks more like a children's handwriting, especially when paired with irregularities, whereas a tall and light handwriting looks more elegant.

4. Letter-spacing/tracking: A font with small tracking makes the text look more compact and is often harder to read. Compact lettering often

¹⁴ Sometimes, in translations of comics, the text is also added with a computer font, which is an easier way to exchange the original text with the translation.

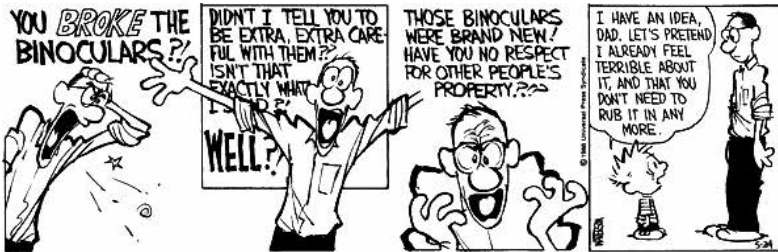
is a result of little space (which is mostly the case with newspaper comics) and can easily look very cramped.

An example of how the lettering can correspond with the message of the comic can be found in Morris's *Lucky Luke* or *Rantanplan* series.¹⁵ Morris chose a very quirky and bulgy font, consisting only of capitalized letters in his French original. The lines in the letters are not geometrically accurate, but rolling lines, which are sometimes harder to read. The **C** ("C") for example, can also easily be misread for a lower case "c." Though the tracking is not very high, each letter is clearly separated from the other, giving the text in the speech balloons a dense look. The letters are not italicized, which allows for a clearly distinguished space for each letter without reaching over into neighboring letters. This gives the typeface a very clean and tidy look, and yet through its curled lines and twirls at the end of the lines the font looks humorous, thereby typographically corresponding to the overall humorous tone of the comic (Morris et al. 3).

A regular font that sets out for legibility can be found in the Mickey Mouse comics, for example. The intended readership is very young, which makes it necessary to have a clear and legible typeface. There are only capitalized letters, and the individual letters are carefully drawn with geometrical clear lines rather than (semi-)circles. Hergé, in *Tintin*, uses a clear font, slightly italicized, and the tracking (or letter-spacing) is fairly broad, setting each letter apart, thus making the text clearly readable. There is a broad white frame between the text and the speech balloon frame. The accuracy of the lettering corresponds with the overall concept of creating a fairly realistic and exciting adventure world (which again corresponds to the more accurate body proportions of the characters). The funnier and less realistic the comics are, the more the artists play with the lettering. When Calvin's father is outraged about Calvin, for destroying his binoculars, the font becomes larger, and in order to

¹⁵ *Lucky Luke*, as well as *Tintin*, or *Rantanplan* or *Astérix* are comic books. I chose examples from comic books as these examples highlight the variations and possibilities of lettering well. However, since the lettering is not a feature unique to newspaper comic strips but also a feature other comic genres use, the examples taken from comic books still work. I added the feature of lettering into an analysis of newspaper comic strips nonetheless (although it is not unique to newspaper comics) because it offers a deeper understanding of newspaper comic strips.

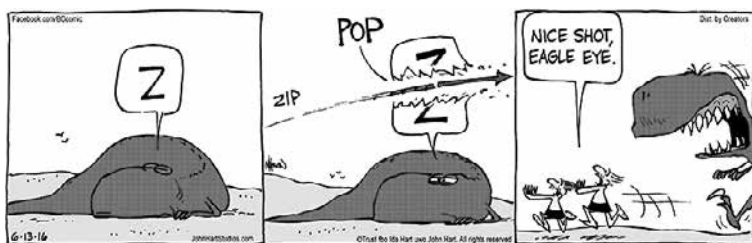
highlight the word “broke,” the letters just have a frame but no color fill (Author 171).



The lettering offers many possibilities. In *Astérix et les Goths* (*Asterix and the Goths*), Albert Uderzo chooses a Gothic print in order to distinguish the Gothic language from the Gallic language Astérix speaks. Without using a different language, Uderzo creates the effect of a foreign language, which becomes especially amusing when he adds a footnote to translate the cuss words that are not written in Gothic font but replaced by special characters and icons. The Gothic version is a more edged version of the icons, and the skull wears a gothic helmet (Goscinný and Uderzo 21).

Not only the text, but the speech balloon itself, can also become an active element. In the following *B.C.* comic, Thor shoots an arrow at a speech balloon with a “Z” in it, indicating the snore of the dinosaur. The arrow goes right through the balloon and cuts it in two pieces, a graphic interpretation of how the arrow interrupts the dinosaur’s dreams. The shooting of an arrow is not necessarily loud enough to wake someone up, and in the comic, the dinosaur does not awake because the dinosaur has been hit by the arrow or because it was too loud, but because the speech balloon has been hit by it. Since the speech balloon is a visualization of the dinosaur’s sleep, the destruction of the balloon is a disruption of the sleep (see p. 116, Hart, *B.C.*).





Lettering in comics can also take on an independent role: It can subtly support the emotions and reveal paralinguistic signs. In this context, comics often also make use of the so-called inflective form often used in the comics, such as *sigh*. This form allows the author to indicate those noises that can neither be expressed by gesture or mimics nor by typography.

4.1.6 Conclusion

The examination of the different parameters shows how much the visual layer, the visual arrangement, the art of the characters, the arrangement of the design, and the panels can say about the overall tone, mood, and purpose of the comic strip. Even the lettering in comics becomes a visualization of emotions and moods. All these parameters play a role when it comes to analyzing a comic strip series, and they need to be set in relation to each other. Neither of them can stand alone, but the interplay of all these different features makes the visual aesthetic of newspaper comics.

Since newspaper comic strips are a hybrid genre consisting of text and image, the visual layer also needs to be set in relation to the narrative textual layer. The reference of the panel to the story of the comic (chapter 4.1.1) is only one of many examples of how the visual layers refer to the narration and vice versa. Since visualization and narration cannot be regarded as two separate artistic mechanisms, the next chapter analyzes the parameters regarding their narrative possibilities of newspaper comics.

4.2 Narration

Although comics use narrative techniques similar to prose, their use of these techniques looks different. Thus, I will draw from categories that are used for analyzing prose narrative. In *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*, Jeremy Hawthorn develops parameters innate to the text, on which I will lean to look at the narrative techniques for newspaper comic strips.

Traditionally, there is a duality of narrative time vs. narrated time. In narratology, narrated time can vary significantly from narrative time – that means the time that passes in the story can be much longer than the time it needs to read the story and vice versa, as, for instance, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which a narration of around 700 pages covers the span of one day, 16 June 1904.¹⁶ Thus the writer can play with time, can use anachronism or anachronistic reference, and can quickly refer to previous events.

Since newspaper comic strips have less space and therefore less narrative time to tell a story, narrative time and narrated time are closer together than in a longer narration and usually only capture a short moment. The shorter the newspaper comics, the more they approach a so-called “narrative Isochronie” in which narrative time and narrated time are nearly identical (Genette 66). Usually the strips only cover sequences that last a moment, like a short dialogue, or incident. Compared to other specimens of narration, comic strips do not leave room for flashback or prolepsis. Whereas in fiction, a leap in time can be created through the written word, comic strips – though some comics have the little narrator box (which occurs mostly in comic books) – usually need to resort to graphic elements to indicate a leap in time, such as a change in daylight, change in clothes, growth, setting, etc. Since indicating a leap in time is graphically and narratively challenging, newspaper comic strips often concentrate on a short span of time.

Hawthorn identifies eight parameters to analyze a novel: Narrative techniques, characters, plot, structure, setting, theme, symbol and image.

¹⁶ Cf. Genette 65–66. He uses Marcel Proust's major work *À la Recherche Du Temps Perdu* as a showcase for how within one single work narrative time and narrated time can vary. At the beginning, Proust needs 180 pages to describe 10 years, whereas later he uses 750 pages for 2 1/2 years.

In the following, I will apply each of these parameters to the narration of newspaper comic strips to see in how far comic strip narration follows these or works according to different parameters.

4.2.1 Narrative Techniques

In a novella, everything comes to the reader via “telling.”¹⁷ The narrator is the fulcrum in novels and is therefore the first element to be analyzed: Is there a personified narrator who is recognizable as a distinct person (Hawthorn 31)? Is it an I-narrator? Is he/she reliable, or totally unreliable like the madman in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” who wants to convince the reader of his innocence? Is he/she involved in the plot? Does he/she interact with the reader and address or try to influence/persuade the reader? Does the narrator comment on the events and characters, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” for example, where the narrator is not a distinct person, but ironically comments on the protagonist’s naivety? And, on a second level, narration can also happen through a different medium instead of a narrator, as in epistolary novels, where narration happens through the medium of letters, as, for instance, in Thornton Wilder’s *The Ides of March*, or Dorothy L. Sayers’s detective novel *The Documents in the Case*.

In (newspaper) comics, however, narration works differently. As it is often done by modernist writers, comics work through showing, and not through telling. In comics, the narrator’s shoes have been filled by the visual qualities of the comic. Whereas the novel relies on the description by a narrator, the comic uses images to show. Therefore, the narrator decreases in importance because most telling done by a narrator is realized visually. A time lapse can be indicated by different daylight, by aging characters, or by a different location, indicating that the character must have walked to a different place.

Since narration always happens through showing in newspaper comics, a narrator is not necessary for a comic, though the artist can make use of a narrator. The traditional way of employing a narrator in comics is through a description field, the narration box within the panel.

¹⁷ With the exception, of course, of modernist texts, like, for instance, Henry James’s fiction.

By doing so, the setting apart of the narrator happens on a visual level, confining everything the narrator says to the little text box. Whereas in graphic novels the narrator can assume a distinct form or personality (as the I-narrator in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, who tells his own family story), newspaper comic strips with little space omit the intermediary to avoid an unnecessary narrative meta-level that wastes visual space, or because it merely does not fit the overall tone of their strip. As Watterson said: "Bloom Country occasionally has a narrator. It's a wonderful device, but it doesn't really fit my needs" (Interview West 58).

In prose, the narrator functions like a mediator between the events and the reader, guides the reader through the events and gives insight into the characters. In newspaper comics, however, the description field usually works as a means to an end and is reduced to containing only most essential information. The omission of a narrator makes the relationship between the reader and the characters very immediate, and the reader becomes a silent constant observer or passive participant of the situation.¹⁸ Additionally, thought balloons are used scarcely, which makes the reader even more an observer because in most cases he does not know more than the other characters in the comic strip. The reader can only see the characters' actions and read what they say. The function of the narrator is thus reduced to a minimum, creating the illusion that the reader is more of an objective and immediate observer, though, of course, the artist preselects what the reader truly sees.¹⁹

¹⁸ This effect is supported by the small range of different camera angles, cf. chapter 4.1.2 on panel composition. A constant eye level perspective creates the effect of the reader being a silent observer. A shift in perspective would involve the reader more emotionally.

¹⁹ However, Hawthorne also says that "in one respect the writing of a novel is comparable to the making of a film. When we watch a film we seem to be seeing 'things as they are'; 'reality'. But a director has chosen how we see these things, this reality; he or she has decided whether the camera will be placed high or low, . . ." (31).

4.2.2 Plot²⁰

Due to its brevity, the plot in newspaper comic strips resembles the plot in short stories. Two rough rules can be applied to the storytelling in newspaper comic strips.

Comic Strips Are a Serial Art Form, Which Is Not a Closed Narration, But Is Designed to Continue

In an age when TV series replace cinema films, serial narration becomes a serious art form. Frank Kelleter's study *Populäre Serialität: Narration – Evolution – Distinktion* shows the relevance in and for today's art world, of which newspaper comic strips are a part. As a form of serial art, newspaper comic strips do not use the traditional way of narration. Frank Kelleter juxtaposes "works" (which are completed in themselves) and "serial art" that relies on sequels. He argues that serial art has an inner coherence that builds up suspense, but unlike works, they rebuild a suspense at the end to prepare the reader for the next sequence:

So wie jedes Rätsel eine Lösung fordert, so fordert jede Lösung ein weiteres Rätsel. . . . Klassischerweise werden die beiden Grundimpulse des Erzählens – die Befriedigung eines Abschlusses und der Reiz der Erneuerung – durch Spannung ausbalanciert: Erregung wird aufgebaut, um wieder abgebaut zu werden. Wer diesen Sachverhalt nur mit Blick auf abgeschlossene Einzelgeschichten betrachtet, so wie es uns die traditionelle Literaturwissenschaft mit ihrer Konzentration auf Werke lehrt, verliert aus den Augen, dass die Spannungskurve nach dem Ende einer Erzählung wieder ansteigt: Was mag wohl im nächsten Buch stehen? Was in einem anderen Vampirfilm anders ablaufen? (Kelleter 13)

Therefore, analyses of serial art always take into account the serial character of the art (Kelleter 15). As a form of serial art, newspaper comic strips depend on the continuation; therefore a comic series needs to be regarded in its entirety as a continuing work of art. A concentration on individual strips would not do justice to the art form.

²⁰ Though Hawthorn mentions character before plot, I consider it necessary to approach the possibilities and the design of plot before coming to characters.

The daily continuation of the series makes them an open art form with no closure, and though the comic strips do not build up on each other, still they create the expectation of continuity for the reader. In that respect, newspaper comics are an open narrative form – they neither have a clearly defined beginning, nor do they have a clearly defined ending. They do not necessarily follow any chronology, and both the entire comic strip collection and the individual strips begin *in medias res*: The first comic strip of a series neither explains any broader context or leads the reader into the series, nor does the first panel of a comic strip function as an introduction to the strip – as Watterson put it: “In a comic strip, you just show the highlights of action – you can’t show the buildup and release . . . or at least not without slowing down the pace of everything to the point where it’s like you’re looking at the individual frames of a movie, in which case you’ve probably lost the effect you were trying to achieve” (Interview West 67). The first panel begins right within the story without offering any explanation for the protagonist’s circumstances. In short stories, on the other hand, starting a story *in medias res* creates the effect of tension. The reader wants to make sense of the vagueness of the narration. In newspaper comics, this effect does not happen. Due to the seriality of the genre, the reader does not linger on one strip in order to find answers to all the questions. The comic strip is too short for answers, and the reader merely awaits the next strip to appear on the following day.

Newspaper Comic Strips Rather Show Stories Than Plots, Usually in an Interchangeable Order

Hawthorn defines plot as “an ordered, organized sequence of events and actions” that keeps a good story running (53). Each plot has an order, or, to phrase it according to E. M. Forster, a “narrative of events with emphasis on causality.” Individual stories are set in a relation so they make sense. Plot always follows a larger design; thus the narrated stories form an interplay of individual stories and characters (Hawthorn 53). Novels have a storyline, and they create suspense; causality is given even when chronology is abandoned. As the details in a novel are meticulously arranged to come together as a plot, such literary devices as foreshadowing work in novels. When the arrangement of a storyline is

too overt, the reader might find it “cheesy,” because the overarching hand of the author becomes too obvious (the “*deus ex machina*” effect).

Life, on the other hand, does not necessarily form a plot but tells individual stories. Incidents and stories that happen in life are neither connected through causality nor interlinked. Newspaper comic strips are similar to daily life in so far as each strip tells a story, but the different strips are (unless it is a continuation strip) not causally linked to a larger plot. Each strip tells a different story, an incident, or short occurrence, only held together by common characters and setting. Unlike novels, where time can extend over several years, newspaper comic strips encompass a few moments, perhaps even less than a minute, and rather capture snapshots. Newspaper comics are a genre that depicts short episodes in life, usually with a humorous twist in the end (cf. ch. 4.4). The reader follows the characters through their daily routine and observes the seemingly trivial incidents in life rather than the big decisions. In *Dilbert*, for instance, the strip focuses on the individuals that make a company, but never gives away major economic decisions made by the CEO. The dramaturgy has no complex storylines so the reader can easily chime in and start reading the series without catching up with previous comic strips. When the constellation of characters becomes too complex, the readership can easily lose interest in the series.²¹

Usually there is no chronology in the way the incidents are arranged. Since there is no overarching plot, the order in which the sequences are arranged and published is not important. This arrangement is naturally related to the publication process: Since the comics are bound to the mass medium of newspapers published on a daily basis, comics have an unreliable readership that might not read the comics and the newspapers on a daily basis. The strip needs to be understandable any time the readers open the newspaper – even if they have not read the paper for several days or even weeks. By telling stories instead of plots the stories are decontextualized and the reader does not need to catch up with previous events. If a character hurts himself in one panel, it is unlikely that the

²¹ This was the case with Lyonel Feininger’s comic strip series *Kin-der-Kids* that ran in *The Chicago Tribune* in 1906: Though his narrated world was thoroughly portrayed, the storyline was too complex, and the reader lost track of the plot and the different characters. The readership decreased, and after half a year, *The Chicago Tribune* abandoned the series.

reader gets to see the person on crutches the next day. The characters also do not age. Therefore, the characters have no past and no future, there are no references to earlier events or a broader context; the plot is reduced to the moment. The very first comic strip of *Calvin and Hobbes*, published on 18 November 1985, tells the story of how Hobbes came to Calvin: It shows how Hobbes gets lured into a tiger trap by a tuna fish sandwich Calvin has prepared. Later, Watterson regretted that first strip as he felt no explanation was needed as to how Calvin and Hobbes teamed up (*Tenth* 27). At times, however, artists extend one story over several strips as, for example, when Lucy, in *Peanuts*, steals Linus's beloved blanket. This episode extends over several daily installments. In that case, Schulz uses the first panel as a catch-up panel to inform the reader of the previous events.

There are, of course, exceptions. Some artists design their comic strips as a plot and keep a chronology, such as Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*. This narrative technique makes the strip move slowly and always heeds the risk of losing the readership, especially since keeping up with a newspaper strip requires dedication from the readers in so far as they have to buy and read the newspaper each day. The artist imposes upon himself a time frame and a rhythm he has to submit to. Other examples for a continuation strip are *For Better or For Worse*, *Doonesbury* or *Judge Parker* by Nicholas P. Dallis, where the characters age in real time. The challenge for this approach to narration is to keep the reader interested and not to make the cast confusingly large over time, which makes it harder for a reader to enter the comic strip at a later stage. The fewer the characters, the better the reader gets to know them, and the more the reader can dive into the story told in the strip.

In that respect, newspaper comic strips follow a pattern of open narration, repetition, and decontextualization. These are techniques associated with literary modernism of the early twentieth century. Interestingly, the rise of literary modernism falls at the same time frame as the evolution of the American newspaper comic strip and the emergence of its narrative conventions. Locating newspaper comic strips within the broader framework of the aesthetics of modernism would require much more space and is not the focus of this analysis, yet it is worth pointing

out a few parallels of the narrative conventions of newspaper comic strips and modernist literary conventions.²²

Literary modernism plays with an open form of narration. There is no clearly defined opening or ending; the narration is even circular. As a serial art form, newspaper comic strips are inherently designed as an open art form. Just as modernist novels deliberately play with ambiguities and open endings, newspaper comic strips begin *in medias res* and have an open ending.

Just as newspaper comic strips show stories rather than plots, modernist literature also began experimenting with the concept of time by breaking up the chronology of a narration and rather working with fragmentations. In her article "Modern American Fiction," Rita Barnard uses Nathan Ash's novel *Pay Day* to work out narrative features of modernism. She points out that one overt characteristic is its episodic character that often lacks any "sense of cumulative significance" and the "desultory character of the narration" (42). Newspaper comic strips also forego any hierarchy in their narration, but they present one episode after the other without attaching any value or hierarchical order to them. Comic strips are plotless in a sense; it is a technique that in an even less structured way resembles a stream-of-consciousness narration in which elements, thoughts, incidents, are randomly strung together. In the same way, the individual comic strips of a series usually work in an interchangeable order. This episodic narration, of course, goes hand in hand with a new role of the narrator – the traditionally omniscient narrator, who directs the reader, no longer exists. Instead, "the modernist writer, often using the present tense and experimental points of view, is caught up in a flux of emotions, memories, and sense perceptions" (Barnard 41). In newspaper comic strips, there is no explicit narrator at all, but the reader is exposed to the immediate story without any further explanation.

²² Of course, Modernism is too complex a movement to reduce it to a handful of characteristics. Modernism as such is a diffuse term as it embraces literary, artistic, and cultural movements. As if that is not enough, Modernism itself also underwent different stages of development. In *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*, Zapf points out three phases with different characteristics (218).

There are more parallels between modernist literary conventions and newspaper comic strips. The blurring of the distinctions of genres, for example, in the hybrid form of image and text forms a perfect union in which two artistic genres completely merge into one, the at times collage-like character of comics (as they can quickly shift between drawing styles, employ cinematographic techniques, or even add photos), or the use of dialects and improper grammar, or the focus on the individual. However, this brief juxtaposition serves to offer a literary framework for the narrative techniques of newspaper comic strips.

4.2.3 Character

“In comedy, nothing transcends character” (“Pt. 3” 5:23). This quote, which Rowan Atkinson ascribes to Charlie Chaplin, is quite true. The character in a comedy is the fuel for a comedy; if the reader cannot sympathize with, or relate to, the character, he will most likely not enjoy the comic or associate with it.

The development of characters in newspaper comics is probably the most important feature that shapes the genre. First of all, due to their brevity, there is only little time (which equals space in comics) to dive into the characters, and the artist needs to use the short time to present the character well. This short time frame forces the artist to use short dialogues and focus on the main points. For Bill Watterson, the careful character design is the pivotal point for a good comic strip:

Their [Calvin and Hobbes’s] personalities expanded easily, and that takes a good 75 percent of the work out of it. If you have the personalities down, you understand them and identify with them; you can stick them in any situation and have a pretty good idea of how they’re going to respond. Then it’s just a matter of sanding and polishing up the jokes. But if you’ve got more ambiguous characters or stock stereotypes, the plastic comes through and they don’t work as well. (Interview Christie 29)

Watterson also argued that the essential thing for the artist is get inside the characters’ heads:

When the cartoonist really understands his characters, they become sympathetic and likable, even when (like Lucy) they are not always the best intentioned. The reader recognizes the characters' motivations and thought processes, and identifies with them. The characters become 'real.' . . . This is what cartooning is all about, but it is not something one can explain how to do. (Watterson, "Issue No. 68" 168)

Secondly, the most common means for newspaper comics is to build up expectation by oversimplifying certain character traits and character flaws. That alone is not outstanding for an artistic genre; nearly any artistic genre presents characters with flaws. Still, newspaper comic strips are special. Their narrative framework, their language of repetition, usually does not allow the characters to develop; they are flat characters. The artist defines a scope of action and sets certain parameters that are valid throughout the entire series. The artist is in submission to these parameters. Other genres try to deal with, and overcome, the character's flaws; they describe the process of development in life. Newspaper comics, however, enjoy exhibiting these flaws without dealing with them, as if the characters are caught in their own personality. In that way, newspaper comics are more realistic because they show the characters dealing with their own failure without moralizing. They do not present superheroes, but make people laugh about the hardships in life. Newspaper comics play with different expectations by showing characters who live in their own miniature world and who repeatedly try to cope with their own characteristics and failures. The comics create familiarities and repeat them over and over again (which is also a key characteristic when it comes to humor and the Comic Mode in chapter 4.4). If not used carefully, a repetition can create boredom because the reader is always confronted with the same static characters and circumstances. However, ideally the repetition creates suspense without a denouement. This pattern of repetition, which drives comic strips, has been the reason why comic strips are often dismissed as mere entertainment with no room for seriousness. In his short essay "The Comics as Non-Art," Karl E. Fortress, a Professor of Fine and Applied Arts, wrote in 1963,

The comic strip creates a set of characters and stereotypes whose images can be recognized signally, especially by dint of repetition and familiarization. There must be no doubt as to what the figures stand for, nor any

possibility of misinterpretation. The result is a series of graphic clichés that can be repeated *ad infinitum* as long as their inventors can continue to attach ideas to them. (112)

Fortress argues that repetition only creates a “series of graphic clichés” with no purpose, no beginning, and no end. According to him, comic strips merely use abridged concepts which are exhausted once the artist runs out ways how to continue the clichés. The language of repetition, however, is not doomed to serial platitudes. Instead, the reader is familiar with the characteristics of the comic strip heroes and waits for them to fulfill their role. Calvin is always the braggish six-year old choleric character who will never like school. There are some artists who painted follow-up comic strips of grown-up Calvin, as, for instance, Dan and Tom Heyerman: On their blog project *Pants are Overrated*, they published several comic strips featuring Calvin and Hobbes 26 years later. Calvin and Susie have married and have a little daughter, Bacon. Whereas Hobbes is now their daughter’s best friend, Calvin and Susie take over the parents’ role (Heyerman and Heyerman). However, the narration does not fit into the original narrative of *Calvin and Hobbes*, as the reader anticipates that Calvin has no past and no future.

Charles M. Schulz’s Charlie Brown is the ever-pessimistic underdog of society; the reader knows that whenever he appears in the comics, he will not succeed: He will never hit the baseball, nor will he date the little red-haired girl. Whereas any other artistic genre relies on the development and change of characters to maintain suspense, newspaper comic strips characters are calculable, and the reader enjoys seeing a familiar character encountering a new situation or challenge. Bill Watterson says that in “most strips, every story can be expected to end with the characters right back where they began” (*Tenth* 7). The reader does not have to get used to change – on the contrary, the characters will not change.

In his chapter about character, Hawthorn analyzes how characters are revealed. The way they are revealed differs in newspaper comic strips from novels where it can be done through showing (actions, words), or through telling. In comics, character design always works through showing. How the revelation of character differs from prose to comic can be seen in graphic novel adaptations of literary texts. In Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Mr. Bennet is introduced to the reader in the following words:

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (Austen 3)

In the graphic novel adaptation by Hugo Petrus and Nancy Butler (2010), however, the father is merely introduced in images (n.p.). Whereas in the novel the reader is told about his sense of humor, his personality, the relationship to his wife and Mrs. Bennet's aim in life to get her daughters married, the graphic novel introduces him by showing.



The text box describes his study as a “haven from life”; it is a spacious room with plenty of books on the shelves. Mr Bennet continues to read his book while talking to his wife – his facial expression is rather stern and focused on the book. In the comic, the reader gets to know the characters more through what they do. In the novel, the narrator can give away the assessment of the characters before the reader even gets to know them.

At the same time, through this seemingly neutral means of narration, fictional and realistic narrative layers can smoothly be intermingled. For *Calvin and Hobbes*, where the ambiguity of whether Hobbes is a stuffed tiger or a real one is never fully solved, this device is essential for the

entire strip. Since there is no narration, there are also no hints toward Hobbes's materiality, but the strip simply endures the ambivalence of Hobbes's existence.

This technique revealing a character grants limited possibilities to the characterization of characters. Whereas in novels there are four prime parameters (description/report, action, conversation/dialogue, and symbol or image to reveal/develop the character), from a narrative viewpoint, newspaper comics are limited to actions and conversation/dialogue. The rest of the characterization works visually on a graphic level (physical appearance, posture, gesture, and facial expressions – cf. chapter 4.1.3 on character design). Symbols or images are rarely used to describe characters. Instead, there are props to characterize them, such as Linus's blanket in *Peanuts*, which comforts his troubled soul, or Susi's stuffed animal Mr. Bun in *Calvin and Hobbes*, who represents her child-like character.

4.2.4 Structure

Whereas the writer uses chapters, thematic elements, or chronology to structure the novel, a comic artist structures his narration through panels. "Panels – which McCloud calls 'comics' most important icon' and which are a 'general indicator that time or space is being divided' – are the most basic aspect of comic grammar" (Chute, "Comics as Literature?" 454). Panels structure the comic, manipulate the narration, and "can control time and use it to dramatic advantage. . . . Ordinary mainstream literary prose does all of this, too; comics differ in that the pictures as well as the words manipulate time" (Harvey 8). Panels define the pace of the narration.

In a way, comics pretend to work like a film, where one observes the passing of a scene, which makes them once more a modernist genre: Comics present one graphic snapshot after the other, and we owe it to our brain that it makes sense of the individual snapshots and brings them together as a whole sequence. The brain fills the "gaps" between the panels and makes the reader believe he or she has observed a whole scene. The gaps between the individual panels are called "gutter" and play an important role in the narration. Just as Ernest Hemingway's iceberg theory argues that a good story depends on an untold story, a

comic relies heavily on the unseen and on our brain to fill in the narrative gaps.

Structurally, panels capture the moments and arrange them. The frame serves as a visual division to distinguish the different units and creates a rhythm for the narration and a reading rhythm for the reader. The reader experiences the sequence himself by following the characters in their world – or, as Will Eisner phrased it:

In visual narration the task of the author/artist is to record a continued flow of experience and show it as it may be seen from the reader's eye. This is done by arbitrarily breaking up the flow of uninterrupted experience into segments of 'frozen' scenes and enclosing them by a frame or panel. (*Sequential Art* 39)

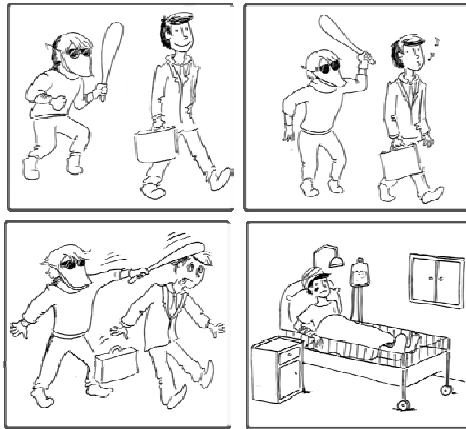
By using the panel, the artist creates a stage (cf. chapter 4.1.1) and leads the reader through the reading process. The gutter can also serve as a narrative technique: When the narrative gap between the panels becomes too broad and the reader has trouble following the story, the artist has created a staccato effect in his narration (see p. 130, illustration by author).



By minimizing the narrative gaps, the artist slows down the narration and creates a dramatic slow motion effect (see p. 131; illustration by author).

According to Scott McCloud, the gutter is the place where visualization ends and imagination and reading begins. In his work *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*, he distinguishes between six different modes of using the narrative gap: “Do you want to jump ahead to a KEY EVENT? Do you

want to put on the brakes and focus on SMALLER MOMENTS? Do you want to draw attention to CONVERSATIONS and FACES?” (15). The slow motion effect is described as the “moment to moment transition” that is “useful for slowing the action down, increasing suspense, catching small changes and creating movie-like motion on the page” (16).²³



The panels are not a helpless phenomenon, but they intentionally show the reader where imagination begins. The human brain always functions in a way that it connects separate items and makes them a unified whole. While neurobiologists refer to the term “predictive coding” for the brain’s ability to connect unknown/unseen things with already familiar patterns (Kesner), McCloud uses the technical term “closure” to describe the brain’s activity while reading a comic. The gutter ideally functions like a glue that takes two separate images and makes them a unified idea – or, as McCloud says: “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (*Understanding* 67).

The following strip shows how the brain makes connections while shifting from one panel to the other: In the first eight panels, Calvin laments that man has electricity and luxury, but has lost touch with

²³ McCloud distinguishes between six transitions in total. The others are 2. action to action (good for narrative efficiency); 3. subject to subject (for moving a story forward); 4. scene to scene (helps to „compress a story down to a manageable length, while still allowing for a range of time-spans and a breadth of locations;” 5. aspect to aspect (to „have time stand still and let the eye wander“); 6. non sequitur, the random sequence of non-coherent images, which plays a role in “experimental comics, providing the occasional nonsense gag in otherwise rational stories” (16-17).

nature. And so he asks Hobbes what he, as a wild animal, deems the purpose in life to be, to which Hobbes replies that it is “to devour each other alive” (*Packed* 31). Both are outside in the snow, but in the last panel, Calvin is inside the house switching on the lights and shouting, “Turn on the lights! Turn up the heat!” Although there is no explanation for this shift of the setting and Calvin’s wild actions, the brain is able to fill this narrative gap between the panels. Apparently, Calvin has changed his opinion on getting in touch with brutish nature and instead rejoices in the benefits of luxury. Though a part of the narration remains untold, the human brain effortlessly makes sense of the narrative gaps between the panels.

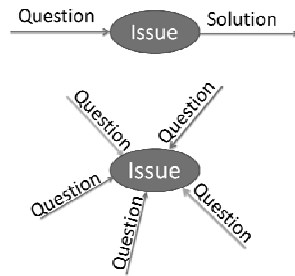
Closure also offers opportunities to play with narrative techniques. A broad narrative gap can be inserted intentionally, or it can play with the features of a fractured postmodern world, as does George Herriman with his Dadaistic *Krazy Kat*. Though the narration remains coherent, the background often shifts randomly from day to night, from one setting to another. This device has an alienation effect because with each panel the reader is confronted with a new setting – McCloud claims that “[s]ome forms of closure are deliberate inventions of storytellers to produce suspense or to challenge audiences. . . . In an incomplete world, we must depend on closure for our very survival” (*Understanding* 63). Like the musical bar line, it gives rhythm to the comic strip, and a deliberate disruption of a rhythm can create an intended surprise effect.

4.2.5 Setting

Hawthorn distinguishes between a realistic/conventional and a stylized setting. “Conventional” means that it serves a purpose (a country house of a classic detective story is a conventional setting), whereas a realistic setting can be a tuberculosis sanatorium.

In newspaper comics, the specific setting (such as references to existing places, cities, countries, etc.) often plays a subordinate role, whereas the concrete place – such as a beach, a school, a home – is essential. Because newspaper comic strip characters are usually common, everyday characters, they appear in common places. Many newspaper comics are set at home and do not even have a defined place or city (*Calvin and Hobbes*, *Peanuts*, *Garfield*, *For Better or For Worse*,

Doonesbury, *Cul de Sac* ...). Dilbert, for instance, works at a company, but the broader context of it does not matter: The name of the company is irrelevant, as are the individual products they work with. This makes the company representative of any company. This is related to the publication process, as newspaper comic strips usually have to appeal to a readership all over the country, whereas a local comic that is set in one specific place with references to local peculiarities would appeal only to a small readership.



4.2.6 Theme

Themes can be overt or covert. There are two notions of what a theme is: It can simply be used in the sense of a “central idea,” or as a “recurring argument, claim, doctrine, or issue” (Hawthorn 61).

It is often argued that newspaper comic strips cannot discuss any themes and central ideas seriously because the comics are too short and rather function as jokes. Though the humorous nature should not be left aside, it should not be disregarded what newspaper comics actually can do. As the in-depth analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* (ch. 5) will show, the genre is capable of discussing a broad range of different social, political, or cultural issues.

Again, this is intertwined with the nature of newspaper comics. As a form of serial art, they are a medium of repetition whose character is described by Engelmann as the aesthetic of repetition and non-closure (25), which again is a feature of modernist literature. However, thanks to their serial character, their way of discourse is different from that of prose. The language of newspaper comics is repetition, and in that respect, discussions of newspaper comics will never jump to conclusions. As an open art form, newspaper comics are capable of discussing issues from different angles and perspectives, taking different perspectives into account. However, the serial form of comic strips does not allow for a conclusion – they always return to themes and discuss them from different angles.

The genre can endure the tension of an unresolved and sometimes even unfinished discussion, and can therefore dare to touch on complex issues. Because of this, newspaper comics are less in danger of moralizing because they focus less on presenting results. Calvin will always discuss the strategies of the art market and plan to become a successful artist/writer, but the reader will never know whether he will be successful or not because time does not pass on. Mickey Dugan, alias The Yellow Kid, will always mock the differences between upper-class society and life in the tenements of New York, but he will only discuss the impossibility of a life from rags to riches. *The Yellow Kid* is merely an infinitely repeated lament on social differences, it is a snapshot, but the comic strip does not provide any social escapes.

4.2.7 Conclusion

As comics are a hybrid art form, narrative and visual aspects cannot be separated. It is the interdependence of the two sign systems that creates a new language in newspaper comics. However, each language has its own parameters that need to be taken into account. The examination of the narrative layer shows that, as a serial art form, newspaper comic strips usually tell everyday individual stories instead of one coherent overarching plot. Usually, due to the lack of a narrator guiding the reader through the strip, the reader becomes a neutral observer. Within that basic framework of comic strip narration, characters usually do not develop, but always remain the same with the same character flaws.

The analysis of the visual and narrative possibilities of newspaper comic strips shows that it is a genre that is by no means restricted to telling crude jokes. In fact, it is, in its narrative possibilities, close to daily life. Due to the serial character, newspaper comic strips can discuss and highlight issues from different angles, but will never achieve final conclusions. As an art form, they usually focus on the smaller incidents in life instead of complaining about the unsolved questions in life – the genre endures the quandary of not fully finding answers. However, as the analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* will show, graphic and narrative techniques merge into one language.

4.3 “Comic strips were the sort of language I grew up speaking”: *Calvin and Hobbes* and the Language of Comics

For Bill Watterson, newspaper comic strips have their greatest potential in visual narration. After finishing *Calvin and Hobbes*, he began to study fine arts and branched out into oil painting. Later, he reflected on his experiences with comic strips and oil painting as following:

Most painting up until modern times was narrative and symbolic and meant to edify, but I don't think painting does any of that especially well. If you're trying to communicate specific ideas or tell a story, I think cartooning is the stronger medium for the task. But I don't actually mean to argue for the superiority of any art. There's a wide array of art for a wide array of ideas. (Interview Robb 21-22)

For Watterson, the strength of newspaper comics – and of course, any multi-paneled comic – is that they can tell stories. In the 2015 interview for the exhibition catalogue, conducted by Jenny E. Robb, the curator of the *Calvin and Hobbes* exhibition at OSU, he spoke about his early beginnings as a cartoonist, and said,

The length and pace of a story, how to create suspense – I soaked up all those things just from reading it [*The Peanuts*] so much. And over time, the machinery of comic strips became second nature as I started drawing my own comics. . . . Comic strips were the sort of language I grew up speaking. (4, 8)

A close analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* reveals how he internalized the language of comic strips and how he was driven by a constant desire to improve his artistic skills and explore the possibilities of newspaper comics: “I kept trying to push the art as far as I could, because drawing was the fun part. I was eager to keep raising the bar and discover what else I might be able to do with the strip” (12). His constant ambition to become better in his art led him into a deeper understanding of the genre and its artistic rhythm. He saw the different sign systems of comics that make the hybrid form of comic strips, image and text, constantly complement one another: “The best comics have funny writing and funny drawing, but sometimes the strength of one can make up for the weakness of the other. Great writing will save boring artwork better than

great drawing will save boring ideas, but the comics are a visual medium, and a funny picture can pull more weight than most people think" (*Tenth* 32). There is not one sign that is inferior to the other, he argued, but it is an interplay in which the one can balance the weakness of the other.

The following chapter will analyze *Calvin and Hobbes* according to the graphic and narrative parameters developed in the previous chapter. The previous chapter aimed at separating newspaper comic strips into graphic and narrative features and then subdividing each chapter into partial parameters. The analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* now shows that graphic and narration are intertwined, and that one refers to the other, thus making graphics and narration inseparable. The following chapter sets out to demonstrate that interrelation of images and narration. It covers the full range of parameters developed in 4.1 and 4.2, but as the visual and narrative components are interdependent, the analysis is condensed to three components: characters (ch. 4.3.1), visual narrative layout elements (ch. 4.3.2), and the visual rendering of the setting (ch. 4.3.3).

4.3.1 "... strong characters that come alive and 'write themselves' ...": The Character Design²⁴

From his long period of sending applications to different syndicates, Watterson learned that the protagonists need to fit the rhythm and language of the genre, both visually and narratively.

In *Calvin and Hobbes*, the characters do not age. Throughout the ten years of publication, Calvin always remains a 6-year old boy. In the last comic strips from 1995, Calvin and Hobbes still look fairly the same compared to their first appearance in 1985 (although, of course, one can see that Watterson's artistic skills developed tremendously over the years). He always remains the same six-year-old boy who has not undergone any socialization process, but rather selfishly fights his way

²⁴ Introduction 9. This chapter does not attempt to be a full-depth analysis of the characters, but rather sets out to show the interrelation of the graphics and the narrative layers as discussed in chapters 4.1.3. and 4.2.3. A longer interpretation of the characters will be done in the subsequent chapter.

through life and society. Watterson handles that device with a good sense of humor. Despite the most unfortunate things that happen to Calvin, it becomes clear that Calvin does not learn any life lesson from his experiences. After getting in trouble for cloning himself multiple times and sending his clones to school instead of going himself, he concludes the episode in a conversation with Hobbes:

Calvin: Well, Hobbes, I guess we learned a valuable lesson from this duplicating mess.

Hobbes: And that is?

Calvin: And that is, um.. it's that, well... OK, so we didn't learn any big lesson. Sue me.

Hobbes: Live and don't learn, that's us. (*Indis* 190)

Calvin does not only have problems to translate his good intentions into action, but he also does not even see any need to change his behavior. When Hobbes asks him for his resolutions for the new year, Calvin replies: "Heck no. I'm fine just the way I am! Why should I change? In fact, I think it's high time the world started changing to suit me! I don't see why I should do all the changing around here!" (*Author* 111). After surviving the attack by the snow goons, Calvin concludes,

Calvin: Well, Hobbes, I guess there's a moral to all this.

Hobbes: What's that?

Calvin: Snow goons are bad news.

Hobbes: That lesson certainly ought to be inapplicable elsewhere in life.

Calvin: I like maxims that don't encourage behavior modification. (*Killer* 90)

Again, Calvin bluntly states that even if he learned a lesson, he would not want to change his behavior in any way. He is content with his selfish character because it promises him the greatest degree of gratification. Convinced that there is no need for character modification, Calvin's character corresponds with the rhythm of newspaper comic strips in which characters do not develop, a common technique. Characters are repeatedly confronted with their limitations and they cannot or do not want to change. Charlie Brown is the ever-pessimistic unlucky fellow, Garfield is always lazy and hates Mondays, and Krazy Kat will always be in love with Ignatz, and is never to realize that his love will remain

unanswered. The limitations of the character are turned into a narrative device.

As Calvin refuses to learn any life lessons, his character never changes and always exhibits the same braggish character traits. If the comics were built on the expectancy that Calvin undergoes socialization, the reader would be disappointed if Calvin never learned a lesson. But as Calvin refuses to learn from his mistakes, the reader is not disappointed by his ongoing bad behavior.

Graphically, Calvin is also designed to express his braggish character. Calvin's disproportionate body and his overlarge head serve to express a wide range of emotions. In that respect, Calvin differs from other comic strip characters. There is no other series that works with strong emotions as Watterson does in *Calvin and Hobbes*. In *Peanuts*, for instance, the characters always bear similar facial expressions, and in *Pearl Before Swine*, the characters' expressions do not seem to change at all. Calvin's exaggerated grimaces mirror that Calvin has yet not undergone socialization. Everything he thinks is thoughtlessly expressed in his mimics. That can be exemplarily seen in one comic strip in which Watterson only relies on Calvin's facial expression to tell the story (*Packed* 10; *Tenth* 146). Calvin dislikes his mother's cooking, and the whole story is carried on by his grimaces. The strong visual rendering of emotions makes it unnecessary to express emotions through words – the reader literally sees the emotions (see: p. 139).

Regarding Hobbes's existence, the changelessness of his character is essential. Both as a stuffed toy and a wild animal, two incompatible characters exist in one character, and the reader never learns whether Hobbes is a stuffed tiger or if he is a real animal. If *Calvin and Hobbes* had a plot or a continuity, the two different realities would not be able to coexist without raising further questions. The tension between Hobbes being both a wild animal in a domestic surrounding and a stuffed toy at the same time works in the open narrative form of the newspaper comic strip. Instead of reaching a point where Hobbes's existence makes no sense and the reader becomes dissatisfied with the mystery of his character, the comic strips do not go that far: they always end abruptly and leave no room for the reader to become dissatisfied with the complexity of Hobbes's character. The reader grasps the tension of Hobbes's existence and enjoys it rather than question it. When Hobbes ties up Calvin



so tightly to a chair that Calvin's father has to untie him, Calvin claims that it is Hobbes's work. His father complains, "Don't make up lies, Calvin. How did you get yourself like this?!" and Calvin defends himself again, "Hobbes did it, Dad! He was going to hold me for ransom, honest!" That claim clashes with the depiction of Hobbes as a stuffed tiger sitting motionless and apathetic next to the chair staring into the

void. The comic strip does not give an answer on how Calvin came to be tied up on the chair. Instead, the strip ends with Calvin being sent to his room, and Hobbes saying, "Ransom?? Who'd pay for YOU, you big fibber?! I'm certainly glad your Dad saw through THAT filthy lie!" Calvin replies, "Oh hush. You ALWAYS get me into trouble" (*Author* 98). The father's doubts that Hobbes is capable of tying up Calvin is interpreted by Hobbes as doubts that anyone would be silly enough to pay a ransom to free Calvin. Watterson does not even attempt to answer the question whether Hobbes is a toy or can act independently – both options are left open as equally plausible. Watterson escapes the question with a punch line by Calvin and Hobbes misinterpreting Calvin's father's doubts. The juxtaposition of the wild animal and the toy is depicted graphically. Hobbes appears in two different sizes: When a stuffed tiger, he is just slightly taller than Calvin, whereas as a real tiger his lanky figure is nearly twice as large as Calvin and thus can "function either horizontally (sneaking up and pouncing) or vertically (walking)" (*Tenth* 33). Whenever Hobbes turns into a stuffed tiger, he shows dull facial expressions. That dichotomy of Hobbes's strong facial expression as a real tiger and his motionless expression as a stuffed tiger can be seen when Calvin takes photos of Hobbes making funny grimaces. When Calvin takes the photos, Hobbes is seen as a ferocious tiger, whereas Calvin's father who, once he has the photos developed, sees merely the same motionless face of the stuffed tiger in all the photographs (*Drooling* 98; *Treasure* 108).

Again, the two incompatible worlds are juxtaposed as equal truths. Ironically, when Susie brings her stuffed rabbit Mr. Bun to play with Calvin and Hobbes, Hobbes cannot relate to Mr. Bun and remarks after they have left, "Mr. Bun seems comatose. Did you notice?" (*Author* 71). That underlines that Hobbes is a special character among other toys and that Calvin's fantasy does not create a world in which all toys come to life. That makes Calvin's story different from children's stories in which the real world and anthropomorphic worlds merge. This is widely popular, especially in British children's literature, such as in Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, or Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. In contrast to his motionlessness as a stuffed toy, Hobbes's movement as a real tiger are of a most agile animal. Catlike he sneaks through the house and seeks to frighten Calvin, romps around with Calvin, or stretches himself while yawning extensively (*Indis* 212).

Since Hobbes and Calvin's parents are tall and lanky, gesture and posture play an important role. When Calvin's father tells a bedtime story, his postures (legs crossed, moving arms, etc.) support the narration (*Indis* 232). The difference in height between Calvin and his parents is often solved visually by a slight shift in the viewing angle or by different positions of the parents: The father is often seen sitting in his armchair reading a newspaper, thereby diminishing the difference in height. At times, however, Watterson seems to not even try to conceal that artistic challenge, but deliberately seems to play with the restriction of the format and includes it in his narration. When Calvin's parents give Calvin last instructions on how to behave while they are away, and Rosalyn the babysitter takes over for the evening, only the upper half of Calvin's head appears in the panel (*Author* 133). The parents are looking down on him, whereas Calvin is looking straight into the camera, visualizing the authority of the parents.

The strong facial expressions and the versatile gestures are an essential part of *Calvin and Hobbes*: They present the images not merely as add-ons to the narration (which is the case in many other comic strips), but they have a strong and independent existence that at times can carry the whole narration.

As an additional means, Watterson occasionally uses lettering to visualize the emotions of the characters. Compared to his creative use of other graphic elements, he is conservative in terms of lettering. He uses bold or larger print occasionally to indicate shouting or anger, but apart from that, his lettering remains fairly the same throughout the years. As the images are very strong in their graphic expression, the regular lettering lends the comics a visual consistency. The text is easy to read, and it is written in sharp capital letters. There are two exceptions, however: Whenever Moe, the school bully, speaks, the text is written in lower case letters to indicate a different voice. The letters look denser and more compact. His speech habit is set apart from the other characters through a different typeface, which indicates a different personality and an outsider. Moe is portrayed as a dumb character who does not show the kind of versatility and agility that the other characters demonstrate, but pointlessly beats up anyone who is weaker than himself. Among the whole set of characters he stands out as extremely flat. The second consistent exception is when Calvin writes something or reads a text at school. When Calvin writes the text himself, it floats freely in the panel

without the regular balloon that confines the text to an allocated space. Calvin's text is written in a scrawly childish handwriting in which upper and lower case letters are irregularly mixed (cf. *Cat* 57).²⁵

4.3.2 Visual Narrative Layout Elements

As discussed in chap. 4.2.1 (Narrative Techniques in Newspaper Comic Strips), comic strips work by showing instead of telling. For Watterson, his characters seem to live an independent life in his imagination that he observes and merely writes down:

The characters were very alive to me. I don't know if this makes sense to people, but when you're doing this right, you're not putting words into the characters' mouths. Instead, you're *listening* to them. They talk on their own, and you just follow along behind. The characters write their own material. And that's what happened – Calvin and Hobbes wrote their own material. Their friendship was not so much constructed as *revealed*. I just felt it. So that makes it a little hard for me to describe. But as a writer, not being able to nearly define this and put it in a box is a wonderful thing. I mean the relationship is organic and alive. At some level, it's unknowable; it's just there. (Interview Robb 13)

Watterson functions as the mediator by reporting the material Calvin and Hobbes produce. However, there is no direct narrator guiding the reader through the comic strip, there is only the artist mediating between the comic world and the reader; the reader merely observes the stories.²⁶

²⁵ Watterson admits that there “are certainly people who could letter the strip better than I do; I don't enjoy lettering very much, but that's the way I write and that belongs in the strip because the strip is a reflection of me” (Interview Christie 10). Since Watterson insisted on doing the artwork himself, he also did the lettering himself.

²⁶ Whereas comic strips usually do not have a narrator, comic books often use that device. The narrator is usually set apart in the little narrator box: “Die Anwesenheit eines Erzählers in der verbalen Erzählung ist kein auffälliges Charakteristikum, denn sie ist in jedem Fall notwendig, weil es ohne sie keine Erzählung geben kann. Dagegen ist sie ein auffälliges Merkmal in der Comicerzählung, weil ihr dort Bedeutung für den Sinn des Textes zukommt“ (Barbieri, qtd. in Hahne 258).

For instance, the question of whether Hobbes is a real tiger or not is never commented on. Both worlds – Calvin’s fantasy world and the adult world of his parents are juxtaposed, and neither seems to be superior or truer than the other. As there are no attempts to explain the incompatibility of the two worlds and as there is no narrator who could do so, it is left to the reader to decide which world to believe in. The technique of presenting two exclusive versions as equals without necessarily opting for one is the structurally modernist element of newspaper comic strips and shows how the genre in a modern sense is capable of playing with subjective reality.

The lack of a narrator harbors the danger that a mere rendering of sequence can become emotionless because the reader is not able to relate to the characters. In the introduction to the 2005 edition, Watterson explains how, in the early beginnings of his comic strip, he himself did not really know his characters: “Keep in mind that when the strip first appeared, I had written only a couple of months’ worth of material and I hardly knew who my characters were” (12). Even Watterson felt that he had to get to know the characters as they were unfolding before him. He did not map out the entire comic strip and the characters when he started the strip; instead he always treated them as independent characters, just as Dorothy L. Sayers in *The Mind of the Maker* argues with a reader about why she will not impose certain ideas upon her protagonist Lord Peter Wimsey. She defends her character:

No, you shall not impose either your will or mine upon my creature. He is what he is, I will work no irrelevant miracles upon him, either for propaganda, or to curry favour, or to establish the consistency of my own principles. He exists in his own right and not to please you. Hands off. (105)

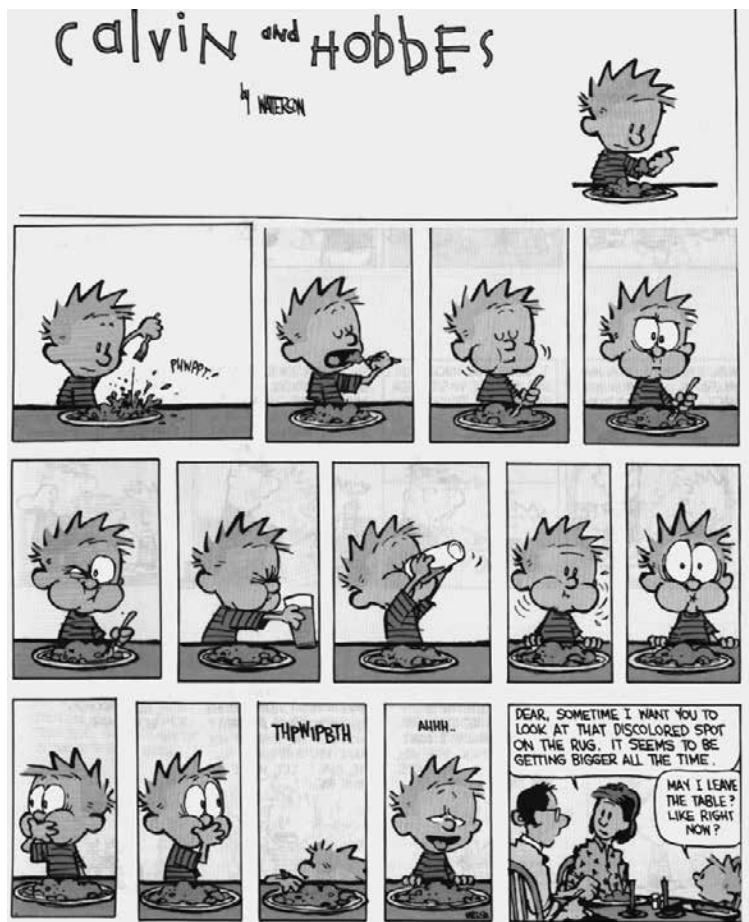
Like Dorothy Sayers, Watterson felt that his characters led an independent life he could not explain to his readership. Despite the lack of a narrator, there are two graphic techniques that enable the artist to render emotions or to structure the narration: the structure and arrangement of the panels and the shift of perspective.

a The Dramaturgy Rendered through the Panel Form

As seen in chapter 4.1.1, unusual panel forms (e.g., overlapping panels or the round panels) can turn into an active element to focus the reader's attention on one particular panel. But also variations of the regular square form of the panel can subtly give the comic strip a dramaturgy in narrating the strip.

Panels with an oblong size can slow down a narration, for example, when Calvin and Hobbes are depicted lying under a tree and the whole panel stretches over a line.²⁷ In contrast, they can also create a hectic atmosphere, as, for instance, in a strip that in the form of snapshots tells the story of a whole summer day that Calvin and Hobbes spend outside (*Cat* 175). It begins with the two getting out of bed and shows how they play in the pool, look for insects, and throw water bombs at Susie, until dawn, when they catch fireflies and eventually have to go to bed again. The strip consists of a total of nineteen individual panels that have exactly the same size. In order to underline that the day was crammed with many different activities, the panels are smaller than usual and show snap shots of the day instead of an arranged plot. Despite the first and the last panels (where Calvin wakes up and goes to bed again), the panels in between are interchangeable. In many panels, Calvin and Hobbes are only partly visible because they run out of the panel or just because the panel is not tall enough to encompass the whole scene. This staccato effect of depicting several snapshots of a full summer day reflect a day packed with different activities of which the reader only gets a glimpse. Watterson uses the size of the panels to lend his comic strips a dramaturgy. In one strip, Calvin pokes at his food, takes a bite, and

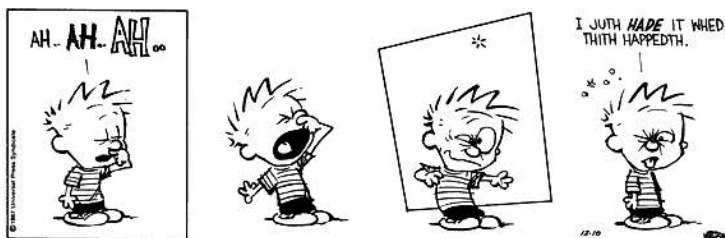
²⁷ "Line" refers to the literal line within the comic strip. Daily comics usually consist of one line only. Sunday strips have more lines, depending on the publication format (that is usually decided by the newspaper). In the upright format, the comic strip usually consists of four lines, whereas in the landscape format, the panels are rearranged in three lines. Since the panel arrangement had to be flexible enough to shift from a landscape format to an upright format, Watterson always felt confined in his artistic powers. After an argument with his syndicate that extended over several years, the syndicate allowed him to use the full landscape format. That enabled Watterson to experiment with perspective, panel format, and panel size, which can be seen in his later Sunday strips.



eventually throws up under the table (*Indis* 133). The top panel expands over the whole line. Until the climax of the strip – Calvin throwing up under the table – the panels gradually become thinner. Since space equals time in comics, the thinner panels indicate that time is passing more quickly. The six smaller panels, when Calvin turns under the table and then reappears, indicate that the pace has sped up compared to the first rather long panels when he still disgustedly pokes at his food. Merely by playing with a different size of panels, Watterson creates a

dramaturgy and transmits emotions through the pacing of the comic strip.

But Watterson also uses the irregular shape of the panel to reflect the emotion of the character that would otherwise only be rendered through facial expressions and gesture. When Calvin feels that he has to sneeze, the panel form in the third panel takes on the shape of an irregular rectangle. Calvin is no longer inside the panel, but the panel becomes an independent graphic element behind him. The graphic irregularity corresponds with Calvin's unrequited sneeziness. In order to set the panel form apart from the other panels, Watterson omits the panel outline in the two surrounding panels (*Author* 101).



The same panel shape occurs when Calvin complains about the food his mother has cooked (*Author* 216). In the first two panels he asks for a new plate because “someone puked on mine.” When Calvin tastes the first bite, he starts choking and screaming. Instead of showing Calvin in one panel after the other, there is one irregularly shaped panel reaching over three Calvins. The reader does not assume that Calvin duplicated himself twice. Instead, the duplication of Calvin shows a speeding up of Calvin's pretended process of dying from food poisoning. Again, Calvin is in front of the panel instead of being inside, and the panel is colored in a lime-green that reminds the reader of toxic waste. The last panel is round and shows Calvin's apparent death from the poisonous food. The geometrical circle as a panel gives the eye some rest in contrast to the other irregularly shaped panels.

Watterson's flexible use of the panel frame offers him an additional visual layer to support the narration and to render unspoken emotions.

b Panel Form and Perspective Shifts

There is one more way in which the use of the panel composition can assist the narration of the story. Bill Watterson's comic strips are very agile in their use of different perspectives. The reader does not observe Calvin and Hobbes from just one perspective, but the angle shifts frequently both horizontally and vertically, which is remarkable for newspaper comic strips with little space. The cinematography lends the comic strip a sense of drama and excitement as the reader does not observe the world of Calvin and Hobbes as a neutral bystander from one angle, but is engaged in the viewing process. In the eighties and nineties, most comic strips had simplistic illustrations that were drawn from the same perspective; comic strips resembled each other visually and were often "a lot of talking heads and gags that could be read with equal effect on the radio" (Interview West 69),²⁸ as Watterson describes the state of comic strip art. By reading *Calvin and Hobbes*, however, the reader himself seems to move, and the perspective shifts as the reader looks at the scene. Watterson described the challenges of drawing Calvin from different angles:

If I wanted to draw Calvin from some odd camera angle, I had to visualize him sort of sculpturally so I could draw it. That's when you discover that the zigzag shorthand for his hair doesn't work in perspective very well. Or you find that his tiny little legs are hard to make run, because he hardly has knees. You invent solutions to these sorts of problems, and that gradually changes the appearance of the strip. (Interview Robb 12)

At times, Watterson even shifts the perspective within a single comic strip many times, for instance, when Calvin, who learns how to ride a bike, is pursued by the same (*Cat* 131). In the chase, the perspective shifts from a vertical angle to a high camera angle to a worm's perspective when Calvin climbs the tree to flee from his bike. The constant shift of the camera angle indicates that the reader himself is also moving, thereby reinforcing the feeling of a chase for the reader.

²⁸ Watterson admits that this is due to the miniature size prescribed by the syndicates. However, even at a small size, *Calvin and Hobbes* is full of perspective shifts.

The creative use of the panel form and the agile shift in perspective makes the comics vibrant without, however, making the reading process tiresome. Each picture is drawn from a different angle so that it fits the narration. The reader's perspective bounces and is as lively as Calvin's adventures and his world.

4.3.3 Visual Rendering of the Setting

The setting of the comic strip is not clearly defined within the comics – there are no references to cities or places. However, in an interview, Watterson said that he was certainly “thinking of Ohio as the setting” (Interview Robb 31). Ohio as his home state seems a natural choice, and yet it is a wise choice as it offers him the four seasons, of which each carries a different mood. However, his choice not to locate the comic strip in one specific region makes it easier for the readers from all over the country to relate to the comic strips.

Calvin's world takes place in any suburb in the eighties: The scenes are either set at school or at home with his family and/or with Hobbes. At home, he is usually concerned with doing his homework or playing outside.²⁹ In addition to not locating the comic strip in a certain region, Watterson also refrained from locating it in a certain cultural context by deliberately not referring to any specific events or people. As Watterson disliked his position as a political cartoonist in which he used the medium of comics to comment on current events, he deliberately excluded that device for *Calvin and Hobbes*: “References to current people and topics usually don't wear well, and basically, that stuff doesn't interest me anyway. I preferred to work with the larger issues underneath, not the surface clutter” (Interview Robb 24). This lack of references, of anchoring the comic strip in a specific time, makes the comic strip timeless. Martell says that “the strip has been transported to a place outside of time and impervious to its degenerative effects” (107). This technique allowed Watterson to discuss the “larger issues underneath,” and offer his characters the chance to touch upon deeper questions of life itself, such as the value of friendship, the meaning of life, etc. The

²⁹ Cf. Krichel 167: There she produces a detailed list of the places and the occupations in *Calvin and Hobbes*.

in-depth analysis, however, will reveal that regardless of how deep the comic strips are, they are nevertheless anchored in the eighties and nineties.

Watterson fills the background very intentionally, and his use of backgrounds varies. Usually the background is kept simplistic in either white or filled with one color. He also uses negative space to show the passing of time or timelessness as opposed to images that are sometimes crammed and clearly located. Props are used to indicate the place, but not to distract the reader. He often sketches a tree or bushes or some grass to indicate an outside setting, or he indicates the school by showing a table or the blackboard. At times when the setting plays no role, Watterson even omits the background altogether, drawing the reader's attention only to the characters and their interactions.

Since the setting is used sparsely especially in the daily strips, the props Watterson uses become meaningful, and without further explanation they determine a setting. So the paper hat, for instance, tells the reader that Calvin and Hobbes are having a meeting of their secret club G.R.O.S.S. (Get Rid of Slimy Girls). The soapbox usually shows that Calvin and Hobbes are racing down a steep hill while philosophizing about the meaning of life. The cardboard box turned upside down suggests a transformation in some way (functioning as a duplicator, the transformer, etc.), or as a time machine when the top is open (*Indis* 251). The scout uniform shows that Calvin and Hobbes are out in the woods with a group of scouts (*CnH* 88).³⁰ By using different clothing or different props, Watterson does not need to tell the reader about the setting, but can show the setting.

In contrast to the minimalized world Calvin lives in, his fantasy world is usually full of details, a "visual feast," as Watterson calls it (Interview West 60). He enjoyed drawing the fantasy worlds, and he described it as a joke that "the fantasies are drawn more realistically than reality, since that says a lot about what's going on in Calvin's head" (Interview Robb 12). Ironically, Watterson turns the visuals of the fantasies and the real world upside down.

Specific props or visual elements serve to indicate that a story expands over several comic strips. In any story that extends over several

³⁰ Watterson quickly abandoned the scout setting, though, because he felt it would not offer him enough material.

days, the first panel serves to inform the reader about previous events. Watterson, however, bypasses that wasting of the first panel by using visual elements that are self-explanatory: In one ongoing story, Calvin disguises himself as a tiger to experience Hobbes's life. The reader can see that Calvin is dressed up as a tiger; thus Watterson does not have to explain the setting in the first panel. The reader might wonder why the boy has turned into a tiger, and when and how he will turn back into a boy, but Watterson does not feel obliged to offer further explanations. Other props or visual elements Watterson uses to keep the narration visually together are, for instance, the magic carpet (*Author* 25), the flooded bathroom when Calvin tries to repair the faucet (*Author* 205), Calvin's hiccup (*Indis* 67), a cardboard TV frame when Calvin runs his own TV station (*Indis* 43), the balloon (Calvin flying away hanging on a balloon), etc. In all these stories, the ongoing story and setting is revealed visually in the first panel.

That prevents reading the ongoing comic strips in a collection from becoming an exhaustive process, as is the case when the first panel has to explain the setting. By using the visuals as an active narrative element, Watterson tells the story without any unnecessary repetitions. With easiness he creates ongoing stories that expand over several days, offering himself the space to dive deeper into a topic and elaborate on an idea. In one ongoing comic strip, Calvin, for example, duplicates his good side to take over his work.³¹ This episode is a profound commentary on human nature and would not have fit in one Sunday strip, let alone a daily. The thoughtful use of props shows how Watterson uses the features and characteristics of the medium at their best without delivering redundant information.

In the previous three chapters, the parameters developed in the theoretical approach to comics have been applied. Two parameters have not been covered so far: Plot (4.2.2) and Theme (4.2.6). These two chapters will be covered in full detail in chapter 5, when several themes discussed in *Calvin and Hobbes* will be analyzed. Before digging deeper into the different themes of the comic strip, however, the nature of humor in comics in general and in *Calvin and Hobbes* in particular will be examined.

³¹ This story will be further discussed in the chapter on theology.

4.4 Humor

4.4.1 Humor in Newspaper Comic Strips

Comics are a unique humorous art form in which image and text merge into one perfect union. Before the emergence of newspaper comics, humor happened primarily in text. However, with this new interdependence of pictorial and written language, an entirely new narrative form came into existence that shaped humorous art throughout the twentieth century and until today.

Humor in prose has a long tradition in America. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, Washington Irving wrote humorous pieces, featuring comical characters like Rip van Winkle, who is sketched with highly exaggerated character traits and a weirdly exaggerated physical appearance. However, the figurehead of American humor is Mark Twain, who did not only produce a multitude of humorous writings, but also popularized the adding of illustrations to text. Mark Twain thought that the visuals had a major influence on the reader, and he carefully supervised each one of E.W. Kemble's 174 illustrations that accompanied the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* (David 331). He understood the power of illustrations and paid close attention to their quality, for example by insisting on non-violent illustrations. Although Kemble's illustrations function as visual add-ons to the humorous narration, Twain introduced this new feature to enhance literary texts.

As the duplication and reprint of images became affordable in the late nineteenth century, the publication of humorous images increased. However, even then images mostly functioned as add-ons to text. Wilhelm Busch's humorous illustrations are also add-ons: the text can easily stand on its own and is not dependent on the visual work. Only gradually, print images emancipated themselves from the text and paved the way for new art forms in which the visual part played a role that exceeded a mere supporting function to serve the text. Thomas Nast's political humorous cartoons are an example of how the visual quality turned into a carrying element of the narration. This increasing importance of images paved the way for comic strips – sequences of humorous drawings in which text and image merge into one unity.

That new narrative form enables new humorous techniques: As the descriptive part of prose is replaced by images – telling is replaced by showing – new techniques of creating humorous effects are possible. Before looking at the techniques employed in newspaper comics, it is necessary to look at humor as such: What is humor? What is it that makes people laugh and what is the underlying mechanism of humor?

The Mechanism of Humor

In the past decades, humor studies have developed into a serious field of research, and yet it has been difficult to approach the topic. The field has been ploughed by scholars from multiple fields, such as biology, mathematics, business, the entertainment industry, literary studies, education, historical sciences, psychology, etc. (cf. Mintz viii; Varum and Gibbons 2). This potpourri of scholars from different fields hints at the complexity of humor and even begins with the failure to find an ultimate definition of what humor in its essence is.³²

Generally speaking, humor is a creative process by which people engage with their social environment by playing with the frustration of expectations. It is the raising of (or alluding to existing) expectations and their subsequent surprising dismantling. Expectations are raised only to dismantle them – it is like inflating a balloon and then pricking it with the pin of surprise. Edward L. Galligan claims that Arthur Koestler's use of humor derived from an interest "in the creative act; consequently, what he emphasizes is the way a joke can cut through layers of stale assumption to reveal a fresh truth. Thus, for him, as for most critics, originality is the prime value in a joke, and an element of surprise is necessary in all jokes" (12). Likewise, Bill Watterson argued that "surprise is the essence of humor and nothing is more surprising than truth" (*Tenth* 207). Humor can reveal truth by dissecting assumptions and then bringing a new and original spin to the situation in the form of a surprise.

³² Instead of working toward definitions, people have rather tried to approach humor by asking about its origin: Why do people laugh? Does that reveal anything about the character of humor? Sigmund Freud, for instance, approached humor as an outburst of the repressed subconscious.

To achieve this effect, the author first has to stir up certain expectations by confronting the reader with a problem for which he anticipates certain solutions. However, this expectation is interrupted by pairing incongruous ideas, thereby unexpectedly dispersing expectations in a surprising manner: The solution is something different than the reader anticipates, as Paul Lewis says in his interdisciplinary work *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*,

. . . humorous experiences originate in the perception of an incongruity: a pairing of ideas, images or events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together. . . . [I]n most cases humor appreciation is based on a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then resolving it, . . . [T]he perception of an incongruity is subjective, relying as it does on the state of the perceiver's knowledge, expectations, values and norms. (8-13)

Again, Lewis links the understanding of humor back to "the perceiver's knowledge, expectations, values and norms" – the reader's cultural memory.

Humor is also an expression of community: Sigmund Freud knew that humor is more than a quirky mannerism. When he wrote his book *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, he devoted a whole chapter to the joke as a social action.³³ As humor plays with familiarities, it requires a common background and a common set of values. People who tell each other jokes thus testify to the fact that they belong to a community. Thus, understanding humor is an expression of community, as readers with the same (cultural) background and a similar set of values and norms will also laugh about similar things. Cultural memory – defined by Jan Assmann as "Sammelbegriff für alles Wissen, das im spezifischen Interaktionsrahmen einer Gesellschaft Handeln und Erleben steuert und von Generation zu Generation zur wiederholten Einübung und Einweisung ansteht" (9) – thus plays a pivotal role in understanding humor. Aleida Assmann argues that cultural memory consists of both remembering and forgetting. She distinguishes in the act of remembering the "active memory" that preserves the past as present (actively done in the act of canonization by museums), from the

³³ Cf. ch. "Das Motiv des Witzes: Der Witz als Sozialer Vorgang" (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*).

“passive memory” which preserves the past as past, referred to as the archive (98). While the first is an intentional action to preserve works for posterity – it embraces, “among other things, works of art, which are destined to be repeatedly reread, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented” (99) – the latter refers to the unintentional traces which often have more impact than the deliberate establishment of a canon. It is “the storehouse for cultural relicts. These are not unmediated; they have only lost their immediate addressees; they are de-contextualized and disconnected from their former frames which had authorized them or determined their meaning” (99). The archive is, as Aleida Assmann points out, “the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past” (102). Humor in newspaper comic strips – and in *Calvin and Hobbes* – relies on both the active and passive cultural memory of the readership. Newspaper comic strips are always created in a cultural context and contain both forms of an active collective memory (Calvin, for instance, refers to specific American characters, such as Roosevelt or Thoreau), as well as a passive cultural memory: The series contains countless references to the passive memory that create a sense of humor that relates particularly to its American readership. The analysis of philosophy in *Calvin and Hobbes*, for instance, reveals the interconnection of the comics and their specific *Sitz im Leben*, their place in life, which can be seen in the references to the Puritan theology. Multiple writers have attempted to find a bridge between specific features of American humor and an American cultural memory, which has been shaped by its specific American history.³⁴

³⁴ Throughout history, writers have tried to find historical arguments for the emergence of American humor. There are some overly optimistic WASP-centered notions of American humor: As early as 1876, Congressman Samuel S. Cox argued that American humor is based on liberty and an abundance unique to the country in which people can do nothing else but develop into a good-natured and humorous nation (Cox 37). In 1936, Sculley Bradley argued similarly by stating that the freedom and fortune of the country is the ground that makes humor prosper (Bradley 63), and that while British humor is more defensive, American humor “prefers to strike first” (64), which is rooted in the Westward Movement mentality Americans needed to conquer the wilderness. Due to America’s unique history, America seems to be fertile soil for producing humor. Or as Jesse Bier says: American humor is “caustic, wild and savage”: the “general impulse of our humor is to enjoy life’s conquest over all particular systems of value” (Bier

Newspaper comic strips play with humor by raising expectations only to deflate them in the individual comic strips. Newspaper comic strips have unique possibilities to employ humor and to play with expectations. It is what I call the Comic Mode: Techniques employed in narrative humor as well as in visual humor are used and brought together in an entirely new form. Some of these techniques will be introduced in the following chapters with special attention given to the unique possibilities of newspaper comics, such as the anachronistic insertion of unexpected references or a different visual rendering of spoken words. Besides a different narrative length, these mechanisms are what brings humor and narration in newspaper comic strips to a different level compared to the humorous narration of Mark Twain.

4.4.2 Incongruity of Characters

Incongruity is one of the major features of humor. The most fundamental incongruity is a dynamic that comes with the pairing of characters. In novels, there is often one protagonist, and a story is told through the eyes of that protagonist. In comic strips, however, due to the small set of characters oftentimes two main characters are featured.

One common humorous technique is the pairing of opposing characters. The pairing alone creates a humorous dynamic and unexpected situation

100). Seen from a twenty-first century viewpoint, regarding America's freedom as the catalyst for American humor seems myopic and overly simplistic, if not propagandistic. However, there is also the more pessimistic approach of a country based on an ideal of freedom (as stated in the Declaration of Independence) it cannot achieve. Robert Penn Warren argues that "America was based on a big promise – a great big one: the Declaration of Independence. When you have to live with that in the house, that's quite a problem – particularly when you've got to make money and get ahead, open world markets, do all the things you have to, raise your children, and so forth." (qtd. in Rubin 5). American humor is a means of coping with that problem, just like Henri Bergson regarded the comical as a defense mechanism: "The humor arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting" (12). This tragic incongruity is the theme and the fuel of American humor, or, as O'Connor argues, it is a constant gap that needs to be overcome (6).

as each character brings out the other character's traits even more strongly. That alone is not a technique unique to newspaper comic strips – it is true for humorous novels (e.g. Mark Twain's juvenile and carefree Huck Finn is accompanied by mature and serious Jim), drama (e.g. in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, clumsy and showy Malvolio is desperately in love with witty Olivia), or slapstick comedy (e.g. *Laurel and Hardy*). This juxtaposing technique is also commonly used in newspaper comic strips: the artist establishes vivid protagonists he can play around with.

Usually the characters paired in comics are incongruous in some way to create a comic effect: In *Calvin and Hobbes*, it is the utterly underbred, selfish, philosophical and choleric boy Calvin paired with a stoic, good-natured but also wild tiger Hobbes, whose real-life existence remains a mysterious puzzle throughout the series. In *Bringing Up Father*, the incongruity comes from the clash of social classes and social norms: The newly rich couple Jiggs and Maggie are torn between the lower class they come from and the upper class they now have access to. In *Ham Shear*, the incongruity is created by a pig protagonist that works at a butcher shop as a regular employee. *Zits* operates with one protagonist, Jeremy, a typical 15-year-old teenager whose clumsiness and unpredictability makes any encounter with his friends and family an entertaining event. The simple matching of these characters alone provides humorous and surprising effects.

At times, comics enjoy breaking these self-created assumptions by making the characters deliberately act differently than anticipated. In one comic strip, Calvin is all dressed up early in the morning, greets his mother and tells her that he got up early to revise his homework. This diligence is so very foreign to Calvin's character that the reader puzzles over the incongruity of Calvin's usual behavior and the way he acts in this comic strip. This incongruity is only dissolved in the next strip, when the reader learns that Calvin used his cardboard box for building an "Ethicator" to clone his good self. The reader has to endure the suspense until it is fully solved in the last panel (*Killer* 119). This sort of incongruity of the character's action and the character's normal personality only works when the artist has established the cast and when the reader is familiar with the traits associated with the individual characters. A reader unfamiliar with the cast would not discover any incongruity in the situation. The effect of the unexpected behavior is that though the character's actions are expected, they are unpredictable.

However, there is also a humorous technique that works only within that unique text-image combination that newspaper comic strips are: they can also play with the incongruity within a character. Animal characters who carry anthropomorphic features in particular can easily display unexpected behaviors by falling back into a behavior pattern common for animals. Their animalistic and domestic selves are united in one character, and can show up whenever suitable. Much of the humor in *Calvin and Hobbes* originates in Hobbes's hybrid character. Whenever Hobbes is hungry at night, Calvin gets up to prepare food for him because, as Hobbes insists, "[m]ost people don't sleep well next to a hungry tiger" (*Weirdos* 88). It is an encounter impossible in real life and unthinkable in literature (even in *The Life of Pi* which tells the story of Piscine who survives a shipwreck on a life raft together with a tiger, the story contains surrealistic elements). However, when Calvin gets into the kitchen, he does not prepare meat as it would be adequate for a hungry tiger, but makes a regular American tuna sandwich while Hobbes instructs him to use "more tuna and less mayonnaise." In this comic strip, Hobbes quickly shifts between his personality as a big cat that could easily eat Calvin and his human character traits (for example, that he is a lover of tuna sandwiches). But it is especially Hobbes's physical appearance – the visual side of his character – that provides many punch lines: Hobbes exists physically both as a wild animal and as a stuffed toy. Without any further explanation and heads-up, Hobbes can shift between those personas. These quick and wordless shifts would not be possible in a prose narrative, but they require a visual part.

However, Calvin himself unites incongruities: He is not only a six-year old regular boy with a vivid imagination who hates school in general and girls in particular, but he is also a sarcastic and precocious philosopher who laments about the world. His quick switches between various facets of his personality – or even personas – keep the readers on their toes. When Calvin explains to Hobbes that he believes that his destiny is determined by the stars, he raises a question that exceeds the horizon of a regular child and speaks like a worldly-wise adult. However, his explanation is less philosophical but rather the spontaneous outburst of a child: "Life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions" (*Author* 152). His quick shifts between the wisdom of a moralist and childish short-sighted pragmatism make his character incongruous in itself. With each panel, Calvin can shift into a different

persona and surprise the reader. In Calvin's case, however, the humorous technique would also be translatable into prose narratives although it would make the reading process tedious. Therefore, since newspaper comic strips aim at a surprise effect within a short sequence of images, the tension of incompatible character traits within one character occurs more often to easily produce a surprise effect.

4.4.3 Literal Meaning of Words

Comic strips can also adopt a literal interpretation of spoken words, playing with the ambiguity of words. Stephan Pastis' character Swine, for example, is sent on a scavenger hunt put together by Professor Bob who teaches philosophy at the university (Pastis, *Ratvolution* 13). Pig returns to the professor and tells him that he had no trouble finding the paper clip and the croquet mallet, but he had trouble finding "truth" and "beauty." The philosopher's search for truth is as old as mankind; around 2,000 years ago, Pilate asked Christ, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Professor Bob takes this question literally, sending a naïve pig out on a scavenger hunt to find truth. Pig's innocent reply that he was not able to find truth and beauty here becomes a confession of the human, or rather non-human limitations.

This technique can lend the comic strips a philosophical ring as they question linguistic familiarities that are usually taken for granted. In one comic strip, Calvin wonders where people go after they die. Hobbes suggests, "Pittsburgh?" and Calvin replies: "You mean if we're good or if we're bad?" (*CnH* 20). The reaction of both characters is unexpected not only in the sense that Hobbes's answer is a literal response as if Calvin was asking for a concrete place, but also in a sense that Calvin in return takes Hobbes's answer literally: He wonders whether Pittsburgh is considered heaven or hell. Though Calvin's reply is entirely unexpected and humorous, it renders a sense of the helplessness and limitation of human understanding when trying to grasp what lies beyond death. After the attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, Thomas Wolff, the editor of the satirical magazine *Titanic*, wrote about the possibilities of the comic: "Komik schafft Distanz zu bedrückenden Ereignissen, sie erlaubt, uneigentlich über eigentlich Unerträgliches zu sprechen – und so den Schrecken zu bekämpfen"

(Wolff). Though uttered in an entirely different context, Wolff's words express that comedy allows a distance to distressing events and creates a platform for speaking about the unspeakable. In the same way, the humor with which Hobbes and Calvin approach the question of the afterlife reflects a helpless stance toward a transcendental question.

Although this technique does not necessarily need images, it can also deliberately render a visual answer to a spoken/written question. The illustration of words taken literally bears a comic effect when the reader is confronted with the dissection of the meaning of a familiar expression. A sign that alerts B.C., the protagonist, to a "draw bridge ahead" is read by him as a request to draw a bridge on a stone next to the sign. This literal interpretation of the technical term makes the reader conscious of the uses of language (Mastroianni and Hart 9). On a different occasion, Calvin is carried away in his imagination by a balloon he is holding. When he enters higher spheres, the balloon explodes and Calvin falls down. While falling, he discovers his transmogrifier gun in his pocket. He exclaims: "I forgot all about my transmogrifier gun! Now I have nothing to worry about! I'll just point it at myself and transmogrify! I'm safe!" (*Author* 190). In the last panel, Calvin is literally transmogrified into a safe, a strongbox. Newspaper comic strips are a genre in which that instant and wordless play with the double meaning of words is effective.

4.4.4 Unexpected Reference/Anachronism

Unexpected anachronistic references can either be to real life or to fictional people, events, or objects usually known from a different context. Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, for instance, is full of anachronisms with unexpected reference to Abraham Lincoln or the ice age with the sudden appearance of a mammoth. In newspaper comic strips, anachronisms often occur in series with a historical setting. Hägar, for instance, frequently makes references to modern inventions or phenomena such as the filing of his income tax.³⁵

³⁵ That is a technique that at times also occurs in children's books, where illustrators hide surprising and unexpected objects in their illustration. It can either function as a riddle for children to find the "odd man out", or it can be

Given their visual side, newspaper comic strips are able to add anachronistic elements without any need to explain them. In *B.C.*, Peter throws a stone tablet with an engraved message into the water: "Our people have learned to embrace technology. What advances have you made? Peter" (Mastroianni and Hart 23). In the last panel, the stone tablet is returned by an unknown sender with the following message: "Your tablet has encountered a problem and must be re-etched. Send error report. Don't send." The modern and anachronistic interpretation of the stone tablet as a tablet computer (which would usually simply drown) catches the reader by surprise – as well as the new message on the tablet. This merging of ancient and modern means of communication is highly unexpected.

References to fictional or living characters can also occur, as for instance when *B.C.* suddenly refers to Steven Spielberg (Mastroianni and Hart 22) or to any comic strip characters. In a *B.C.* comic, for example, the cavewoman named the Fat Broad cooks a big pie from one gigantic pumpkin. In the next to last panel, the friend, the Cute Chick, asks where the pumpkin came from. The last panel shows Charlie Brown waiting for the big pumpkin as a friend explains to him, "I don't think he's coming, dude" (82). Without any further explanation or heads-up, Hart adds a visual reference to an entirely different comic strip series. The connoisseur of *Peanuts* knows that this intertextual reference points to a recurring element in *Peanuts*: Each Halloween Charlie Brown expects the great pumpkin as a god-like figure to appear to the children to bring presents. Although the Charlie Brown panel was drawn by Hart, artistic collaborations between comic artists can actually happen, such as when Bill Watterson agreed to cooperate with Stephan Pastis. In three comic strips, Bill Watterson worked as a ghost artist and contributed three panels (Pastis, "Ever Wished"). It is not the narration itself that creates the surprise effect, but it is the entirely different drawing style that cannot be expressed in words.

The visual side of humor allows newspaper comic strips to play with the comic strip's mediality. This reference to the medium raises awareness of the context and can even amount to an extent that the characters

merely entertaining. Daniel Napp, for instance, the German illustrator of German books, hides random objects in his popular children book series *Dr. Brumm*. For instance, he hides a lollipop in a tree.

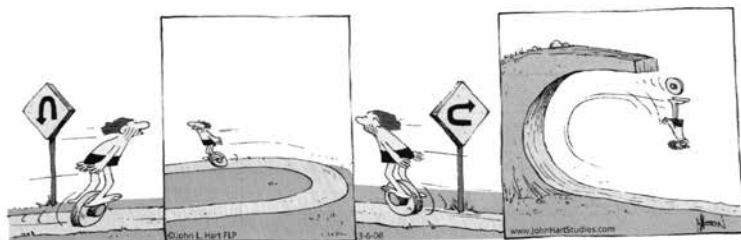
are not only aware of their own medium, but also of their dependency on the artist. In Windsor McCay's comic strip *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* published on April 4, 1907, the unnamed character mourns the sloppy work of the artist, who spills ink on him and the panel. He complains: "Basket by the janitor! He must be awful angry to fire ink at me, like this now" (Braun 58). This breaking of the fourth wall is used in the Epic Theatre in which the audience is directly addressed. This technique creates an alienation effect in which the characters step out of the boundaries of the medium and enter a communication on a different layer outside the comic strip. This alienation effect makes the reader aware of the character's mediality and the confinement imposed on the character by the medium. Bill Watterson also did one single-panel cartoon of himself sitting at the desk ready to sketch, and Calvin standing in front of the desk. In the cartoon, Watterson says, "C'mon kid, do something funny. I have a deadline." And Calvin replies, "Maybe I don't feel inspired. What's it worth to you?" (Watterson "C'mon"). Thanks to their unique combination of image and text, creator and creation can interact on the same level without difficulty.

Due to their short publication process, newspaper comic strips can quickly respond to events taking place in reality – for instance, on the reception of their own comic strip. Scott Adams' series *Dilbert*, for instance, was criticized by Norman Solomon in his work *The Trouble With Dilbert: How Corporate Culture Gets the Last Laugh*. In return, Adams humorously plays with this criticism in one comic strip (Adams 17).

4.4.5 Unexpected Places

By combining the visual and the textual narration, comic strips can take the reader to unexpected places. Either the landscape can take on surprising shapes, or the setting of the situation is fully out of context and stands in an unexpected contrast to the interaction of the characters. As the setting is a visual element and needs no explanation, it is a form of humor that gains its quality through the images.

In *B.C.*, for instance, there are several strips in which B.C. drives with his Stone Age cycle and encounters different street signs warning him of bends ahead. Every time, however, the street takes random and



unexpected turns, like an upward loop, a downward loop, etc. Theoretically, streets like that are possible, but they are extremely improbable (Mastroianni and Hart 6). Thanks to the visual quality of newspaper comic strips, this surprise effect functions without wordy explanations.

A setting can also be unexpected insofar as the reader sees only a part of the setting and assumes it is a different place. When the camera zooms out, the reader is then confronted with a completely different context than assumed. In a *Hägar* strip, the reader assumes that Hägar's wife is calmly adding a little salt to a soup she is preparing. The reader naturally assumes a kitchen setting but is only shown the whole setting in the last panel when the camera zooms out. Instead of the assumed kitchen, the reader sees a war scene in which Hägar and his wife are on top of the fortress. Hägar needs the hot oil to pour onto the enemies to drive them away. The initial scene, which does not appear unusual to the reader, is placed in a new and unexpected context and creates a clash of different, usually incongruous worlds. The wife's ease with which she tastes the soup is a playful antagonism to the hectic battle that surrounds her (Browne n.p.). This sort of unexpected setting would not work in narration; it gains its humorous quality through the graphic side of comics. The zooming out is the pricking of the balloon with the pin of surprise.

4.4.6 Unexpected Reaction of Objects

Objects can work in a way that is incompatible with their physicality. That incongruity of the physicality of objects and their reaction in the comics also creates a postmodern effect similar to the use of anachronisms. This unexpectedness creates a surprise effect that plays with the

reader's expectations of the usual function of natural laws. *Calvin and Hobbes* frequently plays with that sort of humor in Calvin's fantasies.

An unexpected reaction by objects is only employed by comic artists whose series also have an overall absurd tone.³⁶ Johnny Hart and Dik Browne frequently incorporate that sense of humor in their strips, as does Gary Larson in his lunatic cartoons *The Far Side* in which the world is often seen through the eyes of calculating animals that usually outsmart the world of human fools. The reader is caught off-guard by the unusual behavior of an object that is usually not expected to be an active element. In one strip of *Hägar the Horrible*, Lucky Eddie shoots an arrow into a cloud. As a result, it starts raining because he seemingly destroyed the cloud (n.p.). In a *B.C.* strip, the Grog reads "Heavy Snow" in the weather forecast. When he opens his mouth to catch some snowflakes, he is unexpectedly smashed by a gigantic snowflake that has the consistency of granite (Mastroianni and Hart 17). This utterly unexpected and impossible physicality of the snowflake is, of course, the result of a very peculiar and postmodern sense of humor, which fits only to less realistic series.

Again, this effect is created by the combination of visual elements and narration that is unique to comics, and especially effective in newspaper comic strips due to their short and humorous narration.

4.4.7 Conclusion

So far, the analysis of humorous techniques has focused on mechanisms on a micro level and how within about four panels, the artist uses the possibilities offered to him by the unique merging of image and text to produce a surprise effect. However, when looking at humor in a newspaper comic series from a distance, humor in newspaper comic strips has a different effect: Newspaper comic strips are a parody of society. In the strips, society is ridiculed over and over again, at times over the course of years or even decades. The parody is especially pop-

³⁶ "Absurd" in this context refers to unrealistic and imaginative ideas that allow for incongruity, rather than senselessness, as used later in the chapter when it comes to the parodistic quality of newspaper comic strips.

ular in times of transition between periods of art when artists humorously reflect on their mediality, for instance, between modernism and postmodernism.

The term ‘parody’ derives from the Greek word *parodia*, which means “beside-or-against song” (Chambers 3). In a parody, an original work or model is written with a tone “to rejoice in the style they [the parodies] make fun of” (Gross 205); parodies humorously rework an original model and relentlessly point out the weaknesses of that model. An original model can be anything: a person, an epoch, a way of thinking, a culture, a group, a piece of art, etc. Thus, for Linda Hutcheon a parody is “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon xii). A parody does not merely adapt a work, but it is “an imitation which exaggerates the characteristics of a work or a style for comic effect” (Gross xi). A parody, therefore, is less a genre than a methodology by which one characteristic of a work, an age, a movement, etc. is highlighted and exaggerated.³⁷ It is noteworthy that not always a complete work, but individual elements within the work can be a parody. Thus, Chambers regards parodies as an “über-technique” for an “art that plays with art” (11).

In the same way, character traits or situations are oversimplified and exaggerated in newspaper comic strips. They are short and exaggerated parodies, humorous re-tellings of life. They accomplish this by explicitly referring to existing people, events, and the like, but they can also – and more often do – in a broader sense parody their own age, the *zeitgeist*, a way of thinking, or certain issues. The less exaggerated the comics are in their style and their narration, the more they turn into a reflection of the original model. The drawing style in *Little Nemo in Slumberland* is

³⁷ The genre-jumping variety of parodies can be seen in *The Oxford Book of Parodies*, in which John Gross walks the reader through different parodies in literary history. His examples range from Alexander Pope to Allen Ginsberg, and he does not only show the omnipresence of parodies across centuries and artistic genres, but also their complexity. Eighteenth-century sonnets or the twentieth-century fantasy novel *Harry Potter* can be a parody (Gross 205). Furthermore, Marcel Duchamp’s L.H.O.O.Q. (1919), a print of Mona Lisa on which Duchamp doodled a beard and moustache, is a parody of Mona Lisa and shows the “perfect confluence of high art and playground parody.” The title spelled out in French loosely translates as “She’s got a hot ass.” cf. Chambers 9.

not an exaggeration of Nouveau Art, but more an adaptation of its techniques. The character Dagwood in *Blondie*, on the other hand, a nouveau riche, is a highly exaggerated parody of the upstarts of the thirties. Chapter 5, which deals with an analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes*, will study how certain trends and ideas from the eighties and nineties are chosen and exaggerated to different degrees, humorously revealing the shortcomings of the time. As Koestler points out about the nature of humor, parodies can have a specific humorous way of telling the truth by pointing to shortcomings.

As a serial art form in which characters do not change, newspaper comic strips are an endless sequence of parodies. The characters are eternally caught in a world they mock and yet they cannot change. The Yellow Kid is trapped on the same rung of the social ladder and cannot move up in society; Krazy Kat's love for Ignatz remains eternally unanswered, Lucy's Machiavellian maliciousness will always terrorize her neighborhood; Charlie Brown will never find answers to his fundamental questions in life; and even Garfield is caught in his ill will. In that respect, newspaper comic strips are absurd, a term "often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value" (Baldick). Newspaper comic strip heroes repeatedly ridicule their time, a model, without any purpose and they are not able to overcome the shortcomings of their time. Jonas Engelmann describes this phenomenon as a form of helplessness to find truth – questions are repeatedly posed and addressed, but they cannot be solved (25). In one comic strip, Calvin ponders that very quality of humor: "When you think about it, it's weird that we have a physiological response to absurdity. We *laugh* at nonsense. We *like* it. We think it's funny. Don't you think it's odd that we *appreciate* absurdity?" (*Packed* 66). For Hobbes, humor is a mechanism to cope with life: "I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life." Newspaper comic strips form a twentieth-century genre that structurally reproduces and stages the comedy of the absurdity of life.

However, comic strips go beyond the absurd: the lack of change of the characters or the continuation of the plot makes comic strips inherently tragic. The combination of the tragic and the comic is usually defined as grotesque. A popular example of the grotesque is, for instance, Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966): Hamlet's two side characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the

main characters, and tell the story through their own eyes. The two are disoriented and directed by the larger dramatic plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that is happening around them which they are not aware of. Apathetically but with a good sense of humor they drift through the story, whereas the audience is aware of their inevitable death. This combination of their tragic life and the comic makes the play grotesque. In the same way, newspaper comic strips are grotesque, as Patrick Bahners points out in his article about *Peanuts*, "Kindertheater der Grausamkeit", published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2005:

Was ist die Hölle? Die Definition eines theologischen Existentialismus könnte lauten: ein Ort ohne Zeit. In fünfzig Jahren sind die Peanuts um keinen Tag älter geworden. . . . Die Peanuts wachsen nicht. Sie können ihr Leben nicht in die Hand nehmen, nicht aus eigener Kraft ihr Schicksal meistern, bleiben eingesperrt in ihre kleine Welt von Vorgarten, Sportplatz und Klassenzimmer . . . (40)

This constant repetition without any prospect of change – of a brighter future, a change of the miserable situation – forms an endless struggle for improvement without movement and gives the comic strips a grotesque character. On a secondary level, this grotesque world also appears strange to the reader because the reader is confronted with the absurdity of his or her own reality.

Incongruities and unexpected answers make the readers question familiarities and remind them of the singular viewpoint and the habitual stance they have toward certain questions, issues, topics. Through their serial character, newspaper comic strips continually repeat this schema. With each strip, they catch the readers by surprise in some way, be it by confronting them with new and surprising approaches to life, removing the characters from their own small comic world, or by presenting familiarities the reader can identify with in order to feel understood. By merging the narrative and visual elements, artists can operate on a new level on which they can employ a whole range of various creative means.

Humor in newspaper comic strips can occur on many levels and can go beyond the mere humor of verbal jokes or comedy. Incongruities and unexpected answers make the readers question familiarities and remind them of the singular viewpoint and the habitual stance they have toward certain questions, issues, and topics. Through their serial character,

newspaper comic strips continually repeat this schema. With each strip, they catch the readers by surprise in some way, be it by confronting them with new and surprising approaches to life, removing the characters from their own small comic world, or by presenting familiarities the reader can identify with and feel understood. Not only does the artist play on a narrative level: the artist also operates on a visual level on which he can employ a whole range of various creative means. As each comic strip series uses certain humorous techniques, the following chapter deals with Watterson's specific use of humorous techniques.

4.5 "... keep the reader on his toes, ...": Humor in *Calvin and Hobbes*

When Bill Watterson spoke about the hardships of creating the comics, he said: "Each kind of story has its own problems in writing, but my main concern really is to keep the reader on his toes, or to keep the strip unpredictable. I try to achieve some sort of balance between the two that keeps the reader wondering what's going to happen next and be surprised" (Interview West 60). Keeping the comic "unpredictable" means integrating a surprising twist into the comic strip and breaking with the reader's expectations. *Calvin and Hobbes* plays with disrupted expectations on various levels. The humor works most frequently through a clash of vibrant characters but also with unexpected reactions of characters and objects mostly employed in Calvin's imagination. However, as providing unexpected outcomes in a comic strip does not necessarily equal punch lines, the comics have often been regarded as philosophical and profound. Their constant playing with broken expectations makes them humorous nonetheless.

4.5.1 The Pairing of Characters

Watterson always wanted to create characters which are "more than just props to relate a gag The strips I admire go farther than a gag a day, and take us into a special world" (Interview Christie 32). In that respect, he carefully designed his characters so they would not end up as interchangeable props for a joke. He created characters that feature

exaggerated character traits rendering the characters immediately comical. The pairing and collision of these characters creates an unexpected reaction.

The depiction of the characters and their reactions is already an exaggeration of real life. The way Hobbes hits Calvin every time he enters the house or opens a can of tuna would leave Calvin in need of a hospital (*Weirdos* 46), and when Calvin prepares to learn how to ride a bike, he wears a ridiculous amount of clothing, consisting of three pairs of pants, “three shirts, two sweaters, two sweatshirts...” (*Weirdos* 85). Additionally, the facial expressions are drawn in an exaggerated manner. For instance, when Calvin is scared, his eyes are more than half the size of his entire face (*Weirdos* 84). This visual exaggeration itself carries a humorous effect as the collision of the characters and their emotions are expressed in an visually louder way than in reality.

Humor in *Calvin and Hobbes* functions mainly by pairing complementary characters with clashing personalities. Calvin’s character is unpredictable, as Watterson – tongue-in-cheek – says: “From the very beginning, unpredictable things seemed to come out his mouth, and he surprised me” (Interview Robb 10). Both characters unite multiple facets or even personas in themselves: Hobbes is a doll, a wild tiger, and a domestic animal all at once. And Calvin is both an impudent six-year old as well as a mature critical philosopher. Both switch unexpectedly from one role to another, thus frequently surprising the reader.

Calvin and Hobbes are an uneven team: Calvin is a human, Hobbes is a tiger; Calvin is short-sighted, Hobbes sees long-term consequences; Calvin is loud, Hobbes is quiet; Calvin claims to be physically superior whereas Hobbes actually is, etc. But this also extends to other set characters: While Calvin is addicted to mass media, his parents are Luddites; while Calvin is lazy, his father wants him to do inconvenient things to build character; while Calvin hates school, Susie is the eager neighbor girl. However, Calvin and Hobbes also have things in common: When worst comes to worst, both are utterly loyal to each other, both are curious, both live in fantasy worlds and experience adventures there, and Hobbes’s whole existence is even dependent on Calvin as he is the only one to see Hobbes as a real tiger. That is what makes them stick together as a team of two dissimilar characters; the dichotomy of character traits makes each character trait shine even brighter. The pairing of two opposite characters has two effects – funny and contemplative.

Firstly, the contrast appears funny to the reader since one character always reacts in a way opposite to what the other character expects. This is often supported by character design, facial expression, gesture, etc., and the reader laughs at the extreme contrasts. For instance, on the first day of school Calvin laments that he has to return to school. Instead of Susie agreeing with him, she rejoices, "Gosh, I couldn't WAIT for today! Soon we'll be making new friends, learning all sorts of important things, and ..." Calvin expresses his incomprehension by assuming she must have undergone brain surgery: "Your bangs do a good job of covering up the lobotomy stitches" (*Weirdos* 91). Not only does Calvin uttering the words "lobotomy stitches" surprise the reader, but also the matching up of these two contrary characters and them acting out their clashing attitudes in different situations.

Hobbes unites three different contradictory realities in one character – his existence as a wild animal, his domestic side, and his existence as a doll. In that respect, Hobbes can quickly take on different roles and thus surprise the reader by behaving as a wild tiger in one panel, then as a doll or a domestic animal in another. This creates a constant alienation effect, as Hobbes's character is founded on the assumption that the reader does not know what he really is.

But there is also the non-humorous effect the pairing of the characters creates. The clashing of the characters is not necessarily geared toward generating a punch line. As Watterson rather sketches characters than gags, at times the characters are unexpected and funny because they are so realistic and reveal truth about the human condition. Calvin reveals the absurdity and short-sightedness of many ideas, and as the comic strips are so short, they create a condensed summary of character traits, for instance when Calvin and Hobbes are under the starry sky once again. Calvin philosophizes: "Yes, we're just tiny specks on a planet particle, hurling through the infinite blackness." Both stare into the darkness, until Calvin hurries away saying, "Let's go in and turn on all the lights" (*Weirdos* 46).

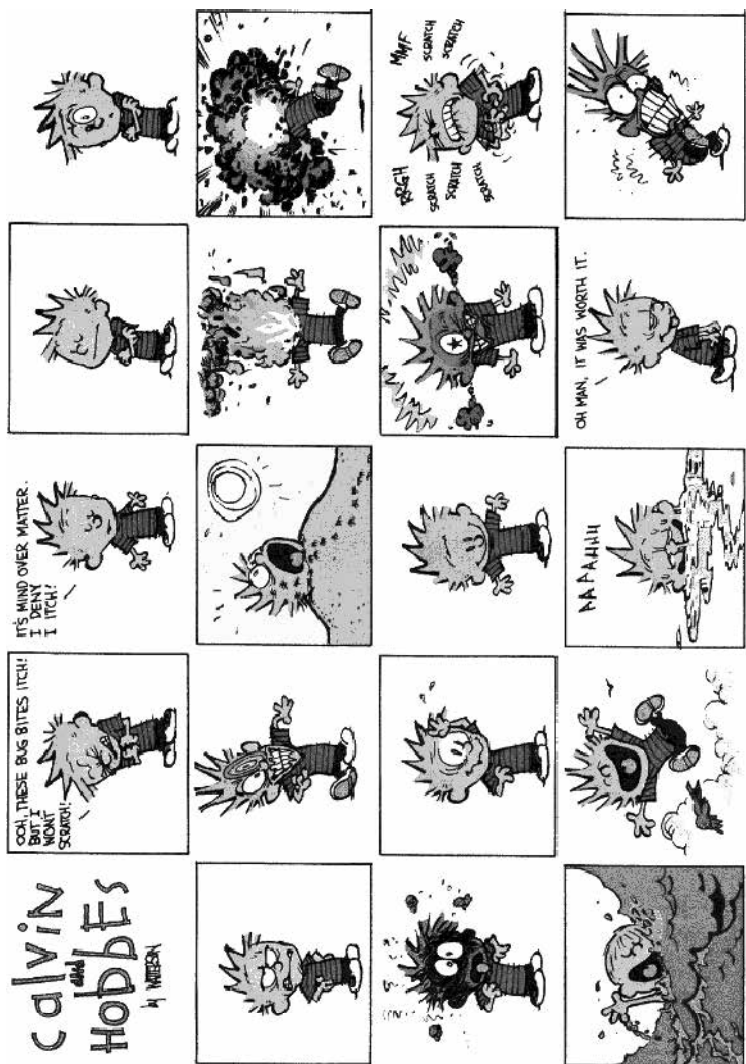
Calvin expresses the human fear of inferiority and insignificance within four panels. The strip depicts the human protective mechanism of ignoring problems or questions that become too overwhelming by distracting oneself with other things. Despite their exaggerated side, the basic human character traits are so realistically designed that the readers can relate to them. The basic actions seem to resonate with the reader.

Through the Comic Mode, however, Calvin raises these questions over and over again, lending the comic series as a complete work an overall absurd tone.

4.5.2 The Fantasies

Calvin's fertile imagination provides surprising effects which happen mostly when people behave differently to what the reader expects, or when objects do not obey the laws of nature as anticipated by the reader. There are three levels to Calvin's imagination on which people or objects show unexpected reactions.

First, there is a visual rendering of emotions that still bears a reference to Calvin's reality. In some comics, Watterson uses unexpected settings and surprising visualizations to translate emotions into images. He uses the whole space of a Sunday strip to illustrate how Calvin tries to resist the temptation to scratch a bug bite. Although from a storytelling viewpoint the strip bears no excitement whatsoever, in each panel Calvin undergoes a different sort of pain dramatically visualized by Watterson. In the images, Calvin's head is literally burning and eventually explodes, leaving a carbonized and smoking head. For the reader, this is a most unexpected physique for Calvin's body, and it is obvious that this is not what really happens to Calvin's body. However, this unexpected visualization is an interpretative illustration of Calvin's sensations (*Packed* 135, see: p. 171).



On a second level, people at times behave differently in Calvin's imagination than they do in reality. This is often associated with Calvin's wishful thinking to add a little more drama to his life. At times Calvin wonders what his parents do when he is not around, and in his

imagination, his parents lead a far more exciting life than in reality. Thus, his fantasies about his parents' lives sometimes provide unexpected twists which clash with the reader's knowledge about Calvin's conservative parents (cf. *Indis* 215; *Indis* 235, *Packed* 25, *Packed* 43). In one comic strip, Calvin imagines his mother preparing a giant octopus for dinner using gas, monkey heads, weed killer, and cement (*Cat* 143). Calvin, however, considers this to be reality: "I saw what went in it! I'm not touching it!" Although Watterson does not prove Calvin's fantasies to be wrong, the readers know that they probably stem from Calvin's imagination.

On a third level, natural laws are annulled in Calvin's fantasies. This sort of humor, however, only happens in Calvin's imagination, and does not seriously interfere with reality. From time to time, Watterson enjoyed surprising the reader: "... everybody works with a day-to-day assumption that gravity is going to be there from the time he gets up until he goes to bed and so on. To imagine if gravity were suddenly turned off requires an effort" (Interview West 59). These are incidents when Calvin hangs on a balloon and it carries him away into the universe, or when Calvin flies on a carpet (*Author* 25), when he shrinks to the size of a fly, when he turns the cardboard box into a transmogrifier, by which he can transmute into different animals (unfortunately, the box breaks when he has just turned into an owl), or when his little cardboard box functions as a time machine and allows him to fly into the past. In his fantasies, no limitations as to what objects can do are set. However, this also applies to Calvin's own body: Gravity can fail and he ends up walking on the ceiling, his body grows bigger (*Indis* 160), his head explodes when he sneezes (*Author* 238), he jumps out of his skin (*Indis* 46), or his body becomes elastic and he bounces down the stairs (*Author* 228). In these strips, the reader questions the laws of physics or other conditions he takes for granted.

... just a simple thing that I've played around with a couple of times is the issue of size. You take your size for granted. You get larger up to a point and then you stop, and then that is your size, and you relate to the world from that viewpoint. If size was a complete variable, what would the world be like? In other words, if there was not a hard and fast rule of growth, how would things change? That presents me with an awful lot of visual possibilities that I enjoy working with. And to adults who are used

to thinking of the world from a certain vantage point, it sometimes seems fresh, I hope. (Interview West 59)

The readers question their own world and see how little it takes to mess up life here on earth. It also offers Watterson the opportunity to operate within a broader world that follows a different logic, thereby taking the readers into fantasy worlds without doing harm to Calvin's realistic suburban world.

Watterson employs humor in various ways in his comic strips. However, he deliberately does not use anachronisms, references to the outside world, as he creates a cosmos that in itself is consistent and in which humor is mainly created through the characters, not through extra-comic intrusion. His imagination gives him the opportunity to break out of that world in a controlled way without doing harm to the overall story.

However, a comic strip is not only about the graphic and narrative techniques and its employment of humor as analyzed in the previous chapters, but, of course, also about the social context in which it takes places. The subsequent chapter is devoted to the social setting of *Calvin and Hobbes* and to how the comic series parodies events and movements of the eighties and nineties.

5 *CALVIN AND HOBBS: ANALYSIS*

5.1 Analysis of the Content

One of the beauties of a comic strip is that people's expectations are nil. If you draw anything more subtle than a pie in the face, you're considered a philosopher. You can sneak in an honest reflection once in a while, because readers rarely have their guard up. I love the unpretentiousness of cartoons. If you sat down and wrote a two hundred page book called *My Big Thoughts on Life*, no one would read it. But if you stick those same thoughts in a comic strip and wrap them in a little joke that takes five seconds to read, now you're talking to millions. Any writer would kill for that kind of audience. What a gift. (Interview Robb 35)

Watterson uses the art form to pick up and discuss various social, political, and cultural topics of the eighties and nineties and to comment on the *conditio humana*. Of course, he addresses things that concern the immediate life of a six-year-old, such as school, leisure time, friendship. But other topics that have no immediate connection to a child's life and actually exceed a child's horizon, such as religion/philosophy, the impact of mass media, art, or ecology, also sneak into the comics. These are not randomly chosen topics; Watterson uses the comics to address a broad range of carefully selected relevant issues.

The eighties was the time of a Culture War in which progressive and traditional values clashed and became part of the public discourse. This war took place in various fields in society:

At the heart of many of the debates across America in the 1980s were social and cultural matters that lacked easy resolution. Such issues as religion, gun control, affirmative action, feminism, race, sexual orientation, diversity, family life, and the environment provided the ammunition for the culture wars that engulfed the nation in the 1980s. Central in these issues was the question of America's future. Far from petering out in the Reagan years, dissent thrived. In most cases, America proved to

be a fertile ground for open disagreements and the free exchange of ideas. (Holloran and Hunt 102)

The Culture War polarized, and far too often oversimplified answers that only served the interest of a few were provided for complex questions. In his comics, Watterson approaches some of these controversial issues and sheds light on them from different angles. However, instead of becoming political by jumping to conclusions himself, Watterson discusses popular opinions of the eighties and nineties and parodies them. Although at times he is moralizing as he critically questions popular opinions, he is not confrontational in his style, but rather humorously illustrates the short-sightedness of some trends. Since Watterson's comics do not usually present alternative answers, they are not educational, or even indoctrinating – they humorously discuss popular opinions without jumping to conclusions.

Although Bill Watterson discusses popular opinions and trends in the newspaper comic strips, he does not use the medium to present coherent and exact results like a scientific study. Also, since the medium does not use linear narration, the comics often comment on issues from different angles, criticize ideas or reveal shortcomings of society, but do not offer alternative solutions. His comics are rather a humorous blueprint of society: they parody and exaggerate trends and ideas. At time, that technique can create a fragmented effect, which is rooted in the fragmented and short narration form of newspaper comic strips.

The quality of parodies must be measured by their comic effect. They invite the reader to go beyond a literal meaning: "They are not a form of writing that is meant to be taken too seriously: they exist primarily in order to amuse. . . . The impulse to parody is too deep, too widespread, and too many-sided to be confined to a fixed format or a rigid set of rules" (Gross xii). In that way, Watterson parodies many questions raised in the postmodern time. As he lays bare the basic concepts of the eighties and voices them through a little six-year-old nuisance, he places lofty philosophical ideas in a little suburban world, in a daily life many Americans can relate to. In light of this new surrounding, many of the issues that were part of the Culture War lose their explosiveness and can be seen from a new perspective. The comic strips are a humoristic reflection of flaws. Additionally, on a macro level, the

endless parodizing of social trends without any escapes – the use of the Comic Mode – lends the comics an absurd tone.

5.2 Philosophy and Theology in *Calvin and Hobbes*

As Calvin and Hobbes are both named after influential European thinkers whose ideas have influenced American thinking from its founding, it is self-evident that the comics discuss philosophy. In the comics, Calvin takes up several theological questions already raised by his namesake John Calvin¹ in the sixteenth century, and places them in a postmodern context. *Calvin and Hobbes* reflects the ideas of the eighties and nineties: It was an age between the beginning of a post-Christian secularized worldview of the sixties and the radicalism of the twenty-first century's New Atheism, and Calvin's answers are a parody of the answers given by the postmodern world. By raising philosophical questions about life, Calvin positions himself in a broader context and attaches importance to his life and thoughts. At the same time, by placing philosophical questions in the context of the suburban world of a six-year old, he attaches a down-to-earth meaning to philosophy, humorously exhibiting the shortcomings and loopholes of the phraseology and ideology of Postmodernism.

Calvin is a typical poster child for the "Me Generation." The term "Me Generation"² is occasionally used as a synonym for the baby-boomers and refers to a generation mostly concerned with its material well-being.³ The generation is defined as "that section of the young

¹ For a distinction of John Calvin the theologian and Calvin the twentieth-century comic protagonist, I will refer to the theologian as "John Calvin" including his first name, and the comic hero merely as "Calvin."

² In his book *Generation Me*, Twenge swaps the two terms "Me" and "generation," and applies the new term to millennials as being the first generation truly concerned with the self. The baby-boomers, he argues, were still a generation that did everything in groups: Vietnam protests, marches for feminism, etc. (48). The millennials, however, look for fun, follow their own individualistic dreams, and are more driven by a true individualism and selfishness (cf. 51).

³ As the baby-boomers refer to the generation born between 1946-1964, Calvin would not be considered a baby boomer (when the comics were

adult population of the U.S. and other Western countries which enjoyed relative affluence in the seventies and eighties, regarded as characterized by a preoccupation with the self and with material gain" (*OED Online*). The "preoccupation with the self" implies a worldview that is concerned with the well-being of the self and a subjectivity in which the self becomes the center of attention. Jean M. Twenge describes it as an "Army of One: *Me*," a generation that is concerned with "self-esteem," a term that first arose in the eighties. For previous generations, "respect for others was more important than respect for yourself," but this changed with the Me Generation (Twenge 44). Watterson's Calvin is primarily occupied with himself, his moods and his desires, which shape his whole worldview. As Calvin outright admits his own selfishness that determines his worldview rather than looking for truth, his philosophy turns into a parody of his age. This analysis begins with the notion of God (ch. 5.2.1). The notion of God shapes the idea of man, his sinfulness, morality, and the interrelation between humans (ch. 5.2.2). The question of predestination or free will, one of John Calvin's central theological questions, is also a matter of debate in the comics (ch. 5.2.3) and leads to the question why man must suffer on earth (ch. 5.2.4).

published in 1985 for the first time, Calvin was 6 years old, so his birth year would date back to 1979). That would make him part of Generation X. However, as Calvin does not age in the comics and remains 6 years old even in 1995, it is impossible to count Calvin to one generation merely by taking his age as a reference point. Calvin's behavior positions him in the baby-boomer generation of which Watterson was a part (as he was born in 1958). Calvin shows characteristics of an older generation, hinting not only at Calvin's versatile character with both childlike and adultlike features, but also at Bill Watterson's target audience: Watterson wrote for an adult audience that could relate to a character with characteristics of an older generation. Watterson, however, was also aware that Calvin would not belong to the Me Generation: In one comic strip, when Calvin tells Hobbes how he hates "hearing about social responsibility! What happened to the unbridled greed, the conspicuous consumption of wealth, and the get-ahead-by-any-means credo??" Hobbes replies: "The 'Me Decade' left without its poster child." Calvin, unhumbly, suggests, "Maybe we can declare THIS the 'Calvin Decade'" (*Packed* 140).

5.2.1 “Do you think there’s a God?”: The Notion of God

“Is God Dead?” The Philosophical Zeitgeist of the Eighties and Nineties

The question whether God exists is as old as mankind. Blaise Pascal’s famous wager about God has become a part of Western general knowledge, and even Immanuel Kant, the famous proponent of the Enlightenment, admitted in his work *Kritik der Urteilkraft* that the belief in an “author of the world” (“Welturheber”) is essential to justify morality.⁴ John Calvin, the theologian, believed in the existence of God as the God of the Bible and considered the Bible the highest authority: “. . . the Word, where the character of God, drawn from his works, is described accurately and to the life; these works being estimated, not by our depraved judgment, but by the standard of eternal truth” (*Institutes* 1, 66-67). Thus, for John Calvin, believing in God meant believing in the authority of the Bible. As the Puritans who came to the New World were Calvinists, Calvinism shaped American society from the early settlement and continues to do so today.

Although Watterson’s Calvin also believes in the existence of a higher being, he does not believe in God in a Biblical sense. Thus, Calvin fits well into the context of the on-going secularization of the Western world in the second half of the twentieth century, which had its beginning in the sixties and from then on gradually pervaded Western society. The phenomenon of secularization was summarized by John Lennon’s interview statement in 1966 in which he claimed that the Beatles “are more popular than Jesus now,” ranking religion behind popular culture. *Time Magazine* picked up the statement in the famous cover headline “Is God Dead?” rephrasing John Lennon’s statement in a

⁴ “Folglich müssen wir eine moralische Weltursache (einen Welturheber) annehmen, um uns gemäß dem moralischen Gesetze einen Endzweck vorzusetzen, und, soweit als das letztere notwendig ist, soweit (d.i. demselben Grade und aus demselben Grunde) ist auch das erstere notwendig anzunehmen: nämlich es sei ein Gott.*).” However, he also says, “Dieses moralische Argument soll keinen objektiv-gültigen Beweis vom Dasein Gottes an die Hand geben, nicht dem Zweifelgläubigen beweisen, daß es ein Gott sei; sondern daß, wenn er moralisch konsequent denken will, er die Annahme dieses Satzes unter die Maximen seiner praktischen Vernunft aufnehmen müsse.” (Kant 322).

question (Croker 99).⁵ The gradual marginalization of religion pervaded the following decades up to the eighties. Not only secularization increased, but, due to increasing immigration, religious pluralism in America prospered in the eighties, diminishing the influence and general acceptance of Christianity. The churches saw a decline in membership, and a Gallup poll shows that the percentage of adults claiming to be Protestant or other non-Catholic Christians dropped from 69% in 1948 to 57% in 1988. At the same time, the number of people claiming no religious affiliation climbed from 2% to 7% and even rose to 13% by 2008 (Newport). However, as Christianity decreased and religious pluralism grew, so did religious conservatism. Religious conservative groups such as the Moral Majority (founded 1979 by televangelist Jerry Falwell) or Focus on the Family, founded in 1977 (Tygiel 111) were founded and quickly grew. Although Ronald Reagan, a divorced actor, was not the typical representative of American conservatism, he transformed into a hero of conservative evangelicals, and his election to the Presidency was claimed as their victory: 67% of white evangelical voters supported Reagan in 1980, and as many as 76% supported him in 1984 (D.K. Williams 135). He shaped American politics in the 1980s and promoted traditional morality and values – which, according to Conservatives, Jimmy Carter did not endorse enough – and “in an age of increasing national cynicism, conservative evangelicals remained fiercely patriotic” (Williams, “Reagan’s” 137).⁶ With Reagan’s presidency, the gap between religious conservatism and liberalism increased and paved the way for the Culture War of the eighties (Holloran and Hunt 344).

⁵ Although the debate is much older and has already been part of the public discourse in the early twentieth century with the Scopes trial, the question gained new popularity from the sixties on, and entered not only popular culture, but also the sciences, and sparked the debate about creationism – the question whether God could have created the world – versus evolution, the attempt to explain the existence of the world without a god. In 1986, Richard Dawkins published *The Blind Watchmaker* in which he argued that life without the existence of God is possible, followed by a publication in 1995, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*.

⁶ Reagan’s slogan, “Let’s Make America Great Again” underwent a revival in Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign rally.

Even secularization does not ignore fundamental philosophical and theological questions, and so Watterson's Calvin speculates on the existence of a higher being that fills the void left by the dismissal of the Biblical God and formal religion. Calvin proves to be no atheist: While lying under tree, Hobbes all of a sudden asks Calvin, "Do you think there's a God?" (*CnH* 82). The silence of the first and third panels reflect the passing of time and Calvin pondering before he answers, "Well, SOMEbody's out to get me." For Calvin, the question of the existence of God or a higher being is no issue at all. Like reformer John Calvin, he takes for granted that a higher being exists; however, Calvin does not believe in the God of the Bible. The comics do not offer apologetic debates about the existence of God, but they silently accept that somebody is out there. However, this "somebody" does not show distinct characteristics. Whereas the comic series *Peanuts*, which is (due to its philosophical depth) often mentioned in the same breath as *Calvin and Hobbes*, is crammed with Biblical references and explicit theological links, *Calvin and Hobbes* does not contain a single reference to the Bible, reflecting a secularized philosophy.⁷

Calvin's theology is a reflection of religious pluralism, for Calvin's notion of a god is a collage of diffuse notions. Calvin addresses the universe as a fill-in for anything that is beyond human power or understanding. But his communications with the universe are one-sided and again mirror the stance of a secularizing world: He is not truly interested in this higher power unless it benefit him in some way. So he mostly addresses the universe when he either wants to have a wish fulfilled – using his notion of a higher being as a machine that is on call – or as a scapegoat if anything has gone wrong. As a child of the "Me Generation," he adjusts his notion of a higher being, or notion of a god, according to his own desires.

However, Calvin's philosophy is a blurry mingle-mangle not only of wild accusations addressed to an impersonal universe, but it also contains the weird belief in the existence of a Santa Claus who substitutes the religious Christmas holiday for a season of commerce. Calvin carelessly unites his belief in the power of the universe and the stars and his belief in Santa Claus, which makes his philosophy smack of the concept

⁷ Cf. Robert L. Short, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*. In this work, Short traces the theological scaffolding behind the comic strip series *Peanuts*.

of a “designer society.” As George Barna said: “We want everything customized to our personal needs – our clothing, our food, our education. Now it’s our religion” (qtd. in Grossman). This exaggeration of a customized religion creates a humorous effect as Calvin’s image of a god is obviously adjusted to his present desires.

“Do you want me to become an atheist?” Calvin and the Indifferent Universe

Calvin tries to get in touch with the universe. However, he does not hold an esoteric belief in the holistic universe. Rather, the universe is a diffuse paraphrase for an unknown power that – in Calvin’s opinion – does a poor job. Therefore, Calvin wants to get in touch with the universe. With his egocentric worldview, he feels that the universe owes him something, and he demands that the universe is there to serve him and fulfil his needs. The weather is an important element in Calvin’s philosophy. It is not only the means by which, according to him, the universe communicates with him, but the lack of the right weather at the right time is also proof of the lousy job the universe is doing. Mostly, Calvin accuses the universe of providing the wrong weather – either there is too little snow, or too much rain, or he asks the universe for a sign. He does not forget to remind the universe of its responsibility toward the world, and especially toward him. The humor lies in the fact that Calvin reads any weather as a response by the universe to his cause. And Calvin either has to realize that he is at the mercy of the universe/the weather, or he bends his interpretation to adjust it to his cause and to free himself from any responsibility.

Calvin frequently feels treated unfairly; thus he enters a power struggle with the universe and eventually has to accept his inferiority. When it starts raining one day while he is playing outside, he complains, “STOP THIS RIGHT NOW! I had big plans outside today and I don’t want to see them ruined!” (*Packed* 73). He feels that the universe wants to challenge him personally, and so he enters the duel, “man against the elements! Conscious being versus insentient nature! My wits against your force!” When the rain gets heavier, Calvin takes off his clothes and bathes in the puddle to prove to the universe how little he is affected by its means. The struggle, however, comes to an abrupt end when it starts

hailing and Calvin runs inside, shouting, "Are you trying to KILL me?! OW! What's wrong with you? OW! OW! I'm going in! OW! I quit! I quit!" In the immediate duel of powers, Calvin realizes that there are external forces he cannot tame. Be it coincidence or wilful malice that it starts hailing, for Calvin it definitely means that he cannot beat the universe.

Calvin cannot even enter a debate with the universe on equal terms, as the universe proves to be indifferent toward Calvin's cause (*Indis* 11, see p. 184). Calvin tries to convince the universe to bring snow with a motivational speech, ("On 'three,' ready? One... two... three! SNOW!"), by begging ("I said snow! C'mon! Snow!"), through rage ("SNOW!"), or indifference ("Ok then, DON'T snow! See what I care! I LIKE this weather! Let's have it forever!"), and by bargaining ("PLEEEASE snow! Please?! Just a foot! Ok, eight inches! That's all! C'mon! Six inches, even! How about just six?"), which eventually results in attempted blackmail ("DO YOU WANT ME TO BECOME AN ATHEIST?").

Although Calvin claims that he does not believe in the Biblical God (at least, he never says so), he believes in the supernatural existence of a god. His threat to become an atheist reveals how little his faith is based on deep conviction and how quickly he is willing to abandon his beliefs. The universe's silence makes Calvin furious, since it seems to him to be an expression of superiority and of indifference toward his pleading. Each different mood is also represented visually. As Calvin jumps angrily and shouts "SNOW!" in the seventh panel, Watterson duplicates Calvin twice, and instead of sticking to one panel as one narration unit, he squeezes three jumping Calvins in one panel. As space equals time in comics, it is a visualization of Calvin's quick and impatient movement. In the ninth panel, Calvin kneels on the grass and stretches his folded hand to heaven as if he was praying to the universe, visualizing his attempted submissiveness but also the religious dimension of his plead. And in the next to last panel Calvin is quiet with hanging shoulders, exhausted from all his fighting and arguing before he confronts the universe with his ultimate threat of becoming an atheist. This last argument openly reveals the religious dimension of his argument, but it also reveals how he overestimates his impact on the universe. Calvin feels he could convince the universe if he only threatened to become an atheist.



Calvin conceptualizes the universe from his human viewpoint, and he cannot see why it would not argue with him.

Calvin only wants to use the universe to fulfill his short-sighted needs. However, the universe's superiority and indifference have a humorous effect; although Calvin reads everything as a sign, the comics never reveal whether there is a real answer or mere coincidence behind the universe's weather answers. Just as the character of Hobbes presents the unsolved question of whether he is a real tiger or a doll, the universe

is never fully revealed as a true power or mere weather. Despite the humorous undertone, the universe's indifference also has a serious ring to it, as it reveals a deep innate human desire to have control over life. This struggle of man versus a surpassing but often indifferent universe is a recurring theme in literary naturalism, which is described by Horton and Edwards as a

product of despair. In it we see reflected the shattering of the optimistic idealism of the Enlightenment: the belief in the dignity and perfectibility of man, the faith in the democratic system, the hope for human growth and progress. . . . Ideals, morals, the spirituality of the universe are to him [the naturalist] empty dreams, undemonstrated and undemonstrable. (254)

In the same way, Calvin is driven by despair, and the reader laughs about Calvin's endeavors in with which he tries to get the universe on his side. And yet, it is also a serious comment on the human inability to control one's life. Thus, Calvin's notion of the universe resembles a naturalistic worldview toward the indifferent stance of the universe as described in Stephen Crane's short poem "A Man Said to the Universe":

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation." (533)

Like Crane's persona, Calvin struggles with an indifferent universe that does not feel obliged to respond to Calvin's selfish demands – "It offends the human ego that nature is indifferent to us. Nature doesn't care if people live or die," Calvin muses (*Treasure* 112). In the same way, in literary naturalism, "every scientific conclusion points only to the helplessness of man; to his infinitesimal unimportance in an indifferent universe, to his lack of dignity and stature" (Horton and Edwards 255). Calvin discusses his naturalistic worldview in his suburban context, in which he is merely annoyed by the universe. In Stephen Crane's literature and poetry, however, the indifference of the universe vitally impacts man, as in the short story "The Open Boat," in which five shipwrecked men fight for survival. Their complaint about the universe's indifference

carries a different urgency, as the narrator exclaims, “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply that there are no bricks and no temples” (383). Calvin’s tantrum, on the other hand, seems disproportionate to the good weather he pleads for. This discrepancy appears ridiculous to the reader.

The lacking reaction from the universe infuriates Calvin. Although both Watterson’s Calvin and John Calvin believe in a form of determinism, the forms are fundamentally different: The latter is firmly rooted in a belief in the existence of a personal God speaking to man individually, especially through supernatural miracles. Watterson’s Calvin, on the other hand, is fully at the mercy of an indifferent universe, and even the interpretation of the weather signs reveals an indifference of the universe toward him.

Yet Calvin’s interaction with the universe has a striking resemblance to the Calvinistic worldview: Like Watterson’s Calvin, the Puritans interpreted natural spectacles as divine signs.

[Miracles] were out-and-out deviations from the settled order; as Willard put it, the rules of ordinary providence are unalterable, but God may if He wishes ‘go from or beside these Rules’ in His extra-ordinary providence. Obviously God had at specific times performed miracles, and these ‘ought to have as much authority in our hearts, as if we had seen the things with our eyes.’ (Miller 227)

Anything that happened outside the “settled order” was read as a divine means to speak to man. In that respect, Increase Mather, for instance, read the arrival of a comet over Boston in 1680 and 1682 as a “divine sign of God’s displeasure and a herald of some mysterious calamity destined to fall upon the Boston populace” (A. Williams). Bad harvests or wars were also interpreted as divine signs. Thus, for the Puritans, a miracle or meteorological anomaly was proof of God communicating with man. In the eighties, Calvin uses the same means to communicate with the universe: He reads the weather as a divine sign. Apparently, even in the twentieth century, Watterson’s Calvin cannot shake off his Puritan heritage and habits. It results in a misreading, as C.S. Lewis describes in *An Experiment in Criticism*:

This laborious sort of misreading is perhaps especially prevalent in our own age. One sad result of making English Literature a 'subject' at schools and universities is that the reading of great authors is, from early years, stamped upon the minds of conscientious and submissive young people as something meritorious. When the young person in question is an agnostic whose ancestors were Puritans, you get a very regrettable state of mind. The Puritan conscience works on without the Puritan theology – like millstones grinding nothing; like digestive juices working on an empty stomach and producing ulcers. The unhappy youth applies to literature all the scruples, the rigorism, the self-examination, the distrust of pleasure, which his forebears applied to the spiritual life; and perhaps soon all the intolerance and self-righteousness (10).

Calvin misreads Puritan theology, and by translating the Puritan conscience into his postmodern world without the Puritan theology, his worldview becomes arbitrary and unsteady, like millstones grinding nothing. The way Watterson's Calvin communicates with the universe is less a receiving of supernatural signs than an uprising against an indifferent universe. Thus, Calvin's odd communication with the universe becomes a parody of the American Puritan heritage.

As Calvin frequently avoids taking responsibility for his actions, he uses the universe's silence to his own advantage to justify his deeds. When he asks the universe for a sign within the next thirty seconds whether he should drop a water balloon on Susie or not, he takes the universe's silence as an endorsement. Only when Susie comes after him and beats him up does he blame the universe for the delayed response: "Why does the universe always give you the sign AFTER you do it?" (*Packed* 118). Everything the universe does or does not do is read by Calvin as a sign, but only to absolve himself from his responsibilities in life. The ridiculousness with which he reads the signs to suit his actions parodies the human inclination not to take responsibility for one's action, but to find a scapegoat – another person, destiny, bad karma, or the universe – for one's mishaps and failures. And overall, as Calvin is dissatisfied with the universe because it does not seem cooperative in fulfilling his dreams, he offers the universe some private lessons: "No efficiency. No accountability. I tell you, Hobbes, it's a lousy way to run a universe" (*Cat* 12). According to him, the problem with the universe is that "there's no toll-free customer service hotline for complaints! That's why things don't get fixed! If the universe had any decent management,

we'd get a full refund if we weren't completely satisfied!" (*Cat* 37). In his infinite overestimation of his capabilities, he feels that he would be much better suited to run the universe.

Although Calvin's experiences with the universe are disappointing, he is still attracted to, and cannot let go of, the supernatural. His deeper intentions for that quest are revealed when Calvin decides to believe in astrology: "[I]t only makes sense that every facet of our daily lives should depend upon the position of celestial bodies hundreds of millions of miles away" (*Packed* 60). On the one hand, he feels the restless and deep human curiosity of wanting to know what the future brings. Yet Calvin also reveals his uneasiness with any higher force influencing his life and rather wishes for it to be "hundreds of millions of miles" away. The result is his paradoxical statement that "it only makes sense" that the stars hundreds of millions of miles away affect his daily life, and he decides to believe in the daily newspaper horoscopes.⁸ Of course, Calvin's experiment turns into a parody of the prophetic power of the horoscope. Over twelve daily strips, Calvin applies the generic prophecies to his life, which become self-fulfilling prophesies and usually result in some catastrophe. As he becomes entirely obsessed with the horoscope, he eventually does not want to believe in horoscopes anymore and sums up his experiences in the last strip: "I've been thinking about the astrology stuff. Everyone wants to know what the future holds, but you just have to wait 'til it happens" (*Packed* 65). Calvin's conclusion is pragmatic, and he jibes at the boom of astrology in American culture, ridiculing the alleged cause-and-effect correlation. Calvin's experiment shows that the horoscope is in fact the cause that creates an anticipated reaction and not vice versa. Calvin's desperate attempt to know the future once again fails.

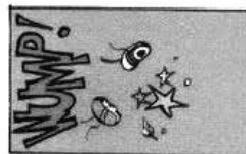
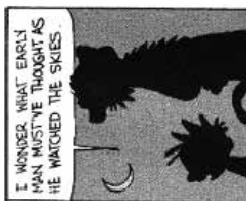
Despite Calvin's humorous side-swipes at the philosophy of the eighties, he does not only mock, challenge, or blame the universe, but he also holds honest fear and reverence for it. This comic strip has a serious ring. In the quiet of nature, Calvin has time to ponder the meaning of life, and it is mostly under a starry sky that Calvin realizes the fleetingness of human existence and marvels at the vastness of the universe:

⁸ The idea of determining the future is, of course, also a recurring topic in the New Age Movement. People also tried to determine specific dates in the future when the new age would begin, as for instance 16/17 August 1987.

On a clear night like this, you realize how incomprehensibly vast the universe really is. I wonder what early man must have thought as he watched the skies. He'd see he was an infinitesimal part of creation, but he'd have no understanding of planets or stars or comets or anything. Imagine how big and mysterious the night would've seemed to him!
(*Packed 7*)

However, while marveling at the miracles of creation, he also feels a connection between the universe and human existence (see p. 190). In the face of the infinity of the galaxy, he realizes the fleetingness of life. This comic strip is kept in purple colors, which often stand for spirituality or mysticism. This corresponds with the overall reverent tone of the comic strip. "I'll bet he felt very fragile and afraid, don't you think?" Calvin feels the insignificance and also the deficiency of human existence, yet he feels that there seems to be some connection between that overwhelming creation and human existence. However, Calvin's philosophical pondering of man's insignificance comes to an abrupt end when, all of a sudden left alone, and stricken with fear, he stares anxiously into the darkness. The next moment, Calvin is overrun and scared to death by Hobbes, who cheerfully explains, "I'll bet that's what he felt like! Sabertooth tiger food!" Calvin's conclusion is as pragmatic as it is Calvinesque as he shuns any serious debates: "From now on I'm going to stay inside at night and watch TV."⁹ Calvin does not want to understand too much of the insignificance, fragility, and fears of man in respect to the vast universe. Instead of allowing himself to be confronted with the question of the meaning of life, Calvin, who is driven by materialism, opts for light entertainment.

⁹ *Packed 7*. Calvin draws the same conclusion in *Magical 21*, when he marvels, "Look at all the stars! The universe just goes out forever and ever!" Hobbes replies: "It kind of makes you wonder why man considers himself such a big screaming deal." In the last panel, Calvin is inside in front of the TV, saying, "That's why we stay inside without appliances." The panel arrangement is designed in a way that the first panel stretches over half the page.



The comics leave many questions unanswered. Calvin believes in a higher power, but what does it look like exactly? Are the universe's answers a higher power's answer, or the occurrence of certain weather conditions? Is the universe really an indifferent power? Calvin plays with general questions regarding God: Is there really a God? Does man, curious for a higher power, read even unrelated weather conditions as transcendental signs? The comics do not provide answers, but rather play with the Comic Mode and endlessly repeat the questions to the degree that they nearly appear pointless. They raise questions and parody the uncertainties of the secularized age that – despite its attempts to get rid of religion cannot shake the deep uncertainty of any transcendental power.

“... kindly old elf, or CIA spook?” Calvin and Santa

In addition to the diffuse notion of an impersonal universe, there is another higher authority after Watterson's Calvin: Santa Claus. Santa Claus is the metaphor for consumerism that has become a religion in American culture and replaced Christianity. The birth of Jesus Christ proclaims “great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day . . . a Saviour” (Luke 2:11-12) and promises an end to human grief and the beginning of peace as the celebration of the reunion of man and God. However, in the comics, Christmas has nothing of that.

Thomas Nast, a nineteenth-century artist, established features typical of Santa Claus that are still famous today, like the red coat and the beard (Halloran 205). Modern Santa Claus, however, was made popular in the twenties as the figurehead of Coca Cola. The character was adapted by cartoonist Haddon Sundblom in 1927 and successfully commercialized by the company. As Coca Cola became the embodiment of American consumerism, so did Santa Claus. By the fifties, Coca Cola had become an important element for Andy Warhol's pop art, in which he comments on American consumerism.¹⁰

¹⁰ In 2015, the Museum of High Art in Atlanta (the home of Coca Cola) held an exhibition “The Coca-Cola Bottle: An American Icon at 100.”

Santa Claus established a close connection between Christmas and consumerism. Along with the secularization of the sixties, Christmas has successfully been turned into a feast of commerce, and religion has been replaced with materialism. As Calvin is driven by an irrepressible greed for presents under the Christmas tree, Christmas time bears nothing of “tidings of comfort and joy” for him, but only the desperate attempts to be good enough to receive more gifts on Christmas day. This struggle, however, brings forth Calvin’s egocentrism.

In Calvin’s world, materialism rules, and only materialism has an impact on his behavior. So Calvin takes a moment for “personal reflection” around Christmas, “a time to spread the joy of material wealth ... A time to glorify personal excess of every kind!” (*Magical* 158). Hobbes, with his outside perspective on the human race, wisely summarizes, “Earthly rewards make consumerism a popular religion.” Santa has become the incarnation of consumerism; he is Calvin’s form of religion, which determines his behavior on earth, thereby replacing the belief in a God or higher causes. Calvin’s deep greed, but also his ultimate insight that he cannot overcome his badness and will not be able to fulfill Santa Claus’s demands, makes Santa, who is out to keep record of every misdeed, his nemesis. Calvin feels haunted by Santa, and he mostly conceptualizes him as an omniscient, grim and bitter old man (*Cat* 33).¹¹

As Calvin views Santa as his enemy, Santa’s omniscience has a hint of McCarthyism and political surveillance. While listening to the song “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” in which the lyrics read, “He sees when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake,” he wonders whether Santa Claus is a “kindly old elf, or CIA spook?” (*Author* 105); and when Calvin imagines an elf reporting to Santa about him, he sees the elf sitting in front of a screen with a big speaker, presenting a whole dossier with “surveillance documents” with “some 400 incidents, but the kid claims extenuating circumstances” to Santa (*Magical* 161).

¹¹ In the second comic strip, Calvin dreams that Santa sends him a letter to tell him he has turned his values upside down: “I’m writing because | this year I’ve repealed | my ‘naughty/nice’ laws. | So now, I urge you: | Be vulgar and crude! | I LIKE it when children | are boorish and rude.” In the last panels, of course, Calvin awakes from this dream. (*Treasure* 67). In the third comic, *Magical* 161, he also merely appears in Calvin’s imagination.

Materialism has become Calvin's god. He does not behave well for a higher cause, but rather in order to acquire materialistic junk. Calvin's notion of god is shaped by the eighties: a melting pot of an impersonal universe he blames for things that go wrong, or for not fulfilling his wishes, and of materialism. Neither concept makes Calvin do something genuinely good just for goodness's sake. His concept of god is a transcendental collage shaped by Calvin's own selfishness, incomprehension and greed.

5.2.2 "People will do ANYthing if the price is right!" Calvin's Notion of Man

Calvin's notion of Santa also shapes his morality. The notions of God and of man are always interdependent, as reformer John Calvin wrote: "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and gives birth to the other" (*Institutes* 1, 37). For John Calvin, man's depravity and the concept of a saving God belong together. Likewise, Calvin's concept of the universe as a placeholder for an unknown constant, and consumerism as life's purpose shapes his concept of man and vice versa. Calvin (1) understands sinful human nature and his own sinfulness, but (2) does not regard it as a major problem and refuses to accept any other authority. Thus, he (3) becomes his own authority, and (4) he becomes the one who defines morality. Defining morality also makes him (5) a (moral) judge over other people.

"Do you think babies are born sinful?" The Sinful State of Humankind

Calvin poses the same questions as reformer John Calvin about the general condition of man. For Calvin, it goes without saying that humankind is "rotten," and he struggles to find ways to cope with this sinful nature (*Indis* 33).

Calvin poses the question what human nature is: "Hobbes, do you think our morality is defined by our actions, or by what's in our heart?"

Hobbes replies, "I think our actions SHOW what's in our hearts." There is one empty panel in which Hobbes has wandered off and left Calvin alone who ponders on Hobbes's profound answer. After a moment of consideration, Calvin shouts, "I RESENT THAT!" (*Killer* 53). Hobbes's reply reveals his conviction that one's deeds are a mirror of one's character. A person does not merely do a bad thing, but the bad deed is an indicator of the deprived human nature and the state of man. Another time, Calvin addresses the issue of human nature directly: "Do you think babies are born sinful? That they come into the world as sinners?" (*Cat* 90). While balancing over a piece of wood that stretches over a creek, Hobbes, with his outside perspective on human nature, replies to that difficult question: "No, I think they're just quick studies." The second panel is longer than the other two panels, signifying that more time passes, and Hobbes leaves Calvin behind with a blank look in his face, murmuring: "Whenever you discuss certain things with animals, you get insulted."

Hobbes's reply is an ironic euphemism on the sinful state of man: Instead of saying that man is sinful per se, Hobbes suggests that man merely absorbs the evil of the world quickly. In that respect, Hobbes reflects ideas of his sixteenth-century namesake Thomas Hobbes, whose idea of man was founded on the basic assumption that every human being is driven by egoism and acts for his own good. Due to this bleak view of man in which, as Thomas Hobbes argued, man is not naturally fit for society, as man is always at war with man, he was often accused of being a misanthrope (Martinich 25). In the comics, Hobbes the tiger reflects that dim view of man. To Calvin, that notion is even more insulting than that of a sinful human nature, as Hobbes's reply suggests that man plays an active role in absorbing sin. Calvin seems to grasp the implications of Hobbes's answer and concludes in the last panel when he is all by himself, "Whenever you discuss certain things with animals, you get insulted."

The question of human nature is one American writers have dealt with for centuries: Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, treats it in his short story "Earth's Holocaust" 150 years before Bill Watterson created *Calvin and Hobbes*. In the short story, humankind gathers at a big bonfire to burn everything that causes evil in the world, which results in a mass destruction of everything. The narrator admits, however, that burning all material goods will not purify and reset mankind:

The heart, the heart, there was the little yet boundless sphere wherein existed the original wrong of which the crime and misery of this outward world were merely types. Purify that inward sphere, and the many shapes of evil that haunt the outward, and which now seem almost our only realities, will turn to shadowy phantoms and vanish of their own accord; but if we go no deeper than the intellect, and strive, with merely that feeble instrument, to discern and rectify what is wrong, our whole accomplishment will be a dream . . . (105-106)

Thus, the question of human nature that Calvin poses is not uniquely postmodern, but rooted in the broad American literary context. However, Calvin cannot come to terms with the idea of man being sinful.¹² Like Charlie Brown, who sighs, "I love mankind... It's PEOPLE I can't stand!!" Calvin distinguishes between a rotten mankind in general and specific people in particular, and when it comes to his own human nature, Calvin is tolerant with his verdict. Although he sees his depravity, he playfully and creatively uses his depraved human nature to his own benefit and reads it as virtue. Consequently, the comics often bear a bittersweet sense of humor as Calvin's frankness humorously reveals deeper truths about human nature and man's excuses for fallen human nature.

Calvin's admission of his own corruption – in the literal sense – becomes clear when Calvin drives with Hobbes in the little soap box. He exclaims, "If I've learned one thing in life, it's that everyone has his price. Raise the ante high enough, and there is no such thing as scruples! People will do ANYthing if the price is right!" Curiously, Hobbes asks Calvin, "What's YOUR price?" "Two bucks cold cash up front," is his answer, and Hobbes laments, "I don't know which is worse... that everyone has his price, or that the price is always so low." Calvin muses, "I'd make mine higher, but it's hard to find buyers as it is" (*Packed* 56).

Calvin totally embraces the corruption of man, and he frankly admits that his greed for money and materialism motivates him. As Calvin's god is materialism, this is not surprising, and again, rather than fight against the world's corruption, he wants to take advantage of it. Calvin

¹² Interestingly, in the eighties the image of man was shaped by humanism. In that respect, Watterson differs from the popular views in which man can improve himself with the help of self-help books.

reveals the serious state of the human condition and his abuse of the same for his own benefit when he invents an “Ethicator” that duplicates his good self to do all the work for him that he is too lazy to do (*Killer* 119). For thirteen daily strips, Calvin successfully sends his good side (visualized by a clean haircut) out to go to school for him and to do his work while he hides at home with Hobbes. It all goes well until Calvin has a severe argument with his good self because it has confessed his affection for Susie. As the good and bad human natures enter an argument, all of a sudden Calvin’s good side dissolves with the words, “Oops ... I had an evil thought.” Flabbergasted, Calvin and Hobbes witness the absurdity of his good side dissolving and the impossibility that an entirely good person persists in a sinful world. In a panel of silence, both Calvin and Hobbes stare at the cloud of smoke as the last remains of Calvin’s good existence. Then Hobbes says thoughtfully, “You are the only person whose good side is prone to badness” (*Killer* 119).



The ambiguity of the moment reveals how his attempt to uncouple his good nature fails and even his good side cannot prevail. This final comic strip shows how Calvin decides to ignore his own sinfulness. Although he is confronted with his badness and the impossible persistence of his good side, Calvin does not ponder more about his inherently bad nature. Instead, he concludes that he must be a genius, as his Ethicator apparently contained a “moral compromise spectral release phantasmatron.” His reaction to being confronted with his sinfulness is to ignore it and avoid thinking about the consequences of what he just witnessed. By drawing unexpected conclusions from the experiment, the comic strip carries a surprising ending. Calvin does not consider the moral implications of this experiment, but is fascinated by the physical methodology. He hits the same line of argumentation when he ponders on heaven: “If heaven is good, and if I like to be bad, how am I sup-

posed to be happy there?" As Hobbes asks, "How will you get to heaven if you like to be bad?" Calvin grasps the incoherence of his argumentation, and he gives in, "Let's say I didn't DO what I WANTED to do. Suppose I led a blameless life! Suppose I denied my true dark nature." Hobbes, who is puzzled, says, "I'm not sure I have that much imagination." Calvin's deduction, however, is to turn the world upside down. His inherent badness is so overwhelmingly present that he decides to regard it as his true virtue. Thus, he rejoices, "Maybe heaven is a place where you're ALLOWED to be bad!" (*Treasure* 22).

As he reinterprets his shortcomings as virtues, Calvin falls for the sin of hubris and considers himself the "culmination of creation" (*Packed* 147); he wants to be addressed by everyone as "Calvin, boy of destiny" (of course, he gives his mother clear instructions how to pronounce it, "But you have to say it right. Pause a little after 'boy,' and say 'destiny' a bit slower and deeper for emphasis. Say it, 'Boy of DESSSTINY! Like that!'") (*Packed* 44). In another comic strip, he poses in front of the mirror and says proudly, "Made in God's own image, yes sir!" In the last case, Hobbes sighs, "God must have a goofy sense of humor" (*Treasure* 31). His attempts to write his autobiography are based on an exaggerated self-assessment, and Calvin does not develop any sense of reasonable self-reflection. He grasps the concept of the sinful human nature, but instead of feeling guilty, he plays with his evil side and wants to take the greatest advantage of it. He refuses to accept his depraved nature, but reads it as his virtue instead.

"First there was nothing... then there was Calvin!" Calvin As God

As Calvin refuses to reflect on his sinful nature but reads each of his evil deeds as a virtue, he rejects any external corrective in his life. He becomes his own authority, not only over his life, but also over weaker objects he wields power over.

To exercise his power, Calvin repeatedly uses a weaker object or creation to reaffirm his godlike power. Calvin creates worlds merely to destroy them, for instance, when he builds a whole world of tiny snowmen (*Indis* 37). Calvin's narcissism, which leads him to a condition in which he regards himself as god-like, is seen in a comic strip in which Calvin equalizes himself with God (*Author* 99). The Sunday comic strip

is crammed with visual effects. Unlike the typical handwritten font used throughout the comics, this one is carefully designed in Gothic print, loosely resembling the font in the Gutenberg print of the Bible. The heavy use of the three lurid primary colors red, blue, and yellow, as well as black and white, makes the comic strip's appearance different from the other strips, where the colors are in accord. The first panel is an empty white panel only filled with four words, "First there was nothing...", referring to the creation of the world described in Genesis 1:1-2. The emptiness of the first panel contrasts with the visually loud panels that follow, in which Calvin is presented as a creating god. However, his self-acclaimed image as a God differs from the biblical god, as Calvin insists on being an evil god, and is rather depicted like an old Greek god. The perspective shifts in the third and fifth panels visually reflect Calvin's superiority: The bottom perspective in the panel makes Calvin appear even bigger. However, comic relief is provided by the discrepancy between Calvin's perspective and his parents' perspective. In the last panel, Calvin's parents watch Calvin as he is playing with his toys. His father says smilingly, "Have you seen how absorbed Calvin is with those tinkertoys? He's creating whole worlds over there!" The mother replies, "I'll bet he grows up to be an architect." The comic relief is also visually reinforced in the last panel, which shows Calvin from a bird eye's perspective as an innocent six-year-old boy as opposed to his fantasy world, in which he is god (see: p. 199).

The great concern of the reformers was to place man back in the proper relationship with God. In a letter to Georg Spalatin, Martin Luther summarizes: "Wir sollen menschen [sic] und nicht Gott sein. Das ist die summa" (415). Watterson's Calvin does not understand this, and instead of coming to terms with his human existence, he turns the world upside down and becomes his own god and authority.

Calvin's self-aggrandizement, however, frequently and yet unexpectedly clashes with reality, and the discrepancy shows the limitations of his worldview. Calvin believes he has power over flowers and presents himself as a god. As he holds a watering can, he exclaims, "It's up to ME to decide if you get water or not! I control your fate! Your very LIVES are in my hands" (*Author* 198, see p. 199). Within three panels, Calvin talks himself further into a frenzy, but in the last panel it starts raining, leaving Calvin speechless. He has to accept that he has got the short end of the stick, and at times when he has suggestions for im-



provement for the universe, he also has to admit that things are good the way they are (*Indis* 45). At one point, Calvin's own creations even seem to be superior to him: When Calvin and Hobbes create snowmen that come to life and terrorize him, they suddenly find themselves in a power struggle with their own creation. In the end, Calvin and Hobbes manage

to overpower the snowmen at night by hosing them down and thereby freezing them.

Calvin's careful conception falls entirely to pieces whenever Moe, the school bully, beats him up for no reason. In the same way that Calvin feels superior to a defenseless flower, Moe feels superior to a defenseless Calvin whose reasoning and bargaining has no effect. Although Calvin is constantly confronted with his own limitations, he does not draw any conclusions from that insight nor does he seem to question his conceptualization of himself. Calvin maintains the tension of deeming his powers godlike and yet embracing his human powerlessness without feeling the urge to revoke either of the two poles.

"I find my life a lot easier the lower I keep everyone's expectations": Calvin as Moral Authority

Calvin's self-ascription of divine powers also extends to the question of morality and how morality can be constituted. Calvin's struggle with morality and good behavior becomes real at Christmas: As Santa is the personification of materialism, Christmas turns into a bargain in which Calvin trades good deeds for material wealth. However, Calvin is so much driven by his greed that his evil deeds pop up everywhere, and the more he tries to be good the worse the outcome is (*Cat* 31-32; *Indis* 171; *Killer* 51). He touches on deep moral and philosophical questions like: What does "good" really mean? Calvin finds himself in a catch-22: Since deep inside he knows about the corruption of human nature, he wonders how humankind can be good at all, and therefore he poses the question: "Do I really have to BE good or do I just have to ACT good?" (*Indis* 13).¹³ Calvin's only hope to fulfill his materialistic desire is

¹³ This deep philosophical question that has driven humankind throughout history is a core topic in the Epistle to the Romans: Can a fallen humankind please a holy and perfect God? The Pauline answer is that man should be, but cannot be, good. Not even a "character overhaul" (*Cat* 36), as Calvin suggests for the rest of humankind, would do it, but Paul argues that "if Christ *be* in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:10). In theological terms, the "good" in a person only comes through a complete renewal by the Holy Spirit and not through self-discipline and an overhaul. The question of how man can be

becoming his own moral authority, questioning and redefining the understanding of 'good' and adjusting his definition of morality to his behavior. Often that leaves him in a struggle with his conscience, his mental compass, which contradicts his own definitions of good and evil. It is Hobbes who, as an animal with an outside perspective on human nature, often sarcastically points to the shortcomings of Calvin's questionable definition of morality.

Aside from simply hoping that his bad deeds will go unobserved – "Look Hobbes, no one SAW us fighting, right? This can be our little SECRET, OK? Santa doesn't have to know about this, right?" (*Indis* 172) – or questioning Santa's criteria (*Author* 105),¹⁴ thereby demanding a different scale and trying to escape the "naughty/nice" dichotomy by pleading for insanity, he also considers lowering the overall standard to be a fair means to be content in life (*Packed* 23). Instead of studying for tests at school, as Susie does, getting an "A" on her test, Calvin exclaims, "Boy, I'd hate to be you. I got a 'C'. . . . I find my life a lot easier the lower I keep everyone's expectations" (*Indis* 15). But despite merely hiding or accepting his low performance, Calvin mostly relativizes his bad behavior and his notion of 'good.' This relativization is more than a child's excuses: It is a reflection of the attempt to escape the binary system of good and bad, and thus is a reflection of postmodern morality.

Calvin relativizes the notion of 'good' as a universal standard by replacing it with the individual "motives" of each individual. Calvin's excuse is that because his "natural predisposition" is leaning more toward doing evil than other children, it is more difficult for him to be good. Calvin hopes, "I think one good act by ME, even if it's just to get presents, should count as FIVE good acts by some sweet-tempered kid motivated by the pureness of his heart, don't you?" With these words he throws a giant snowball at Susie, and while running away, Hobbes says, "Of course, in your case, the question is academic." Calvin replies, "I

good, which plagues people across the disciplines – theologians, philosophers, artists, and writers – plagues Calvin especially at Christmas time: Is it good enough if he just does good, or does he "have to be good in my heart and spirit?"

¹⁴ Calvin questions the criteria Santa uses, and pleads for "Temporary insanity! That's all it was!"

wanted to put a rock in the snowball, but I didn't! That should be worth a lot!" (*Cat* 30). Calvin feels that he should be judged according to an individual scale with adjustable notions of 'good.' He also tries to argue that overall he is not as bad as one would assume: "It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't KILLED anybody. See... that's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars. I don't practice cannibalism. Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get lots of presents?" Hobbes objects, "But maybe good is more than the absence of bad" (*Killer* 81). Eventually, Calvin asks Hobbes to write "a glowing character reference" he could send to the north pole overnight which Hobbes refuses to do: "Oh no, I'm not going to perjure myself for you! MY record's clean!"

In 1989, Charles Taylor described that relativism in his philosophical work *Sources of the Self*: "This moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good" (3). Taylor points out a shift away from "the nature of the good," from a general state of goodness toward the individual deed has to be interpreted in its context. That is exactly Calvin's way of arguing: He wants to be judged according to the individual deed rather than by his general nature, which would free him from Santa's alleged demands.

However, Calvin's thought construct goes even further. He does not only want his own deeds to be seen in context, but he calls for universal tolerance. His debate about the relativity of tolerance culminates in a conversation with Hobbes about the relativity of moral values. Every year around New Year's Eve, Calvin and Hobbes discuss New Year's resolutions. Usually, Calvin refuses to make any. He argues: "See, in order to improve oneself, one must have some idea of what's 'good' that implies certain values. But as we all know, values are relative, every system of belief is equally valid and we need to tolerate diversity. Virtue isn't 'better' than vice. It's just different." Again it is Hobbes who comments on his philosophy: "I don't know if I can tolerate that much tolerance" (*Treasure* 129). Hobbes reveals the shortcoming of Calvin's so-called tolerance, which is only tolerant toward his own trespasses. Calvin replies, "I refuse to be victimized by notions of virtuous behavior."

Calvin's so-called tolerance reveals the downsides of relativism, as it goes along with a loss of foundation. G.K. Chesterton said that "modern tolerance is deafer than intolerance" as it ignores basic values (122). Calvin uses the postmodern rhetoric of the relativity of morality to suit his actions, and he eventually gives up his belief in any ethics: "I don't believe in ethics any more. As far as I'm concerned, the end justifies the means. . . . It's a dog-eat-dog world, so I'll do whatever I have to, and let others argue about whether it's 'right' or not."¹⁵ Consequently, Calvin thinks relativism through and concludes that any given norms are abandoned. Again, Hobbes reminds him of the impracticality of his thought construct by pushing Calvin in a mud puddle. Hobbes explains, "You were in my way. Now you're not. The ends justify the means." Calvin reveals the selfishness of his philosophy: "I didn't mean for EVERYONE, you dolt! Just ME!" (*Indis* 69).

In Calvin's worldview, the place of God is left empty. It is a reflection of a secular worldview of the eighties, in which man searched for new ways to constitute morality. In 1993, philosopher Zygmunt Bauman published his work *Postmodern Ethics*, in which he discusses the ambiguity of ethics in postmodern times. He speaks about the "moral choices" and problems in postmodernism and maintains that they are more than "temporary and rectifiable effects of human weakness, ignorance or blunders." There are no "predetermined solutions" and there are "no hard-and-fast principles which one can learn, memorize and deploy in order to escape situations with a good outcome and to spare oneself the bitter aftertaste (call it scruples, guilty conscience, or sin) . . ." (32). Calvin finds himself in that postmodern ethical dilemma of having no scale for his values. But whereas Bauman thinks of larger personal, political, or social problems, Calvin's moral dilemma is only stirred by his own greed and by the banality of wanting to receive more gifts.

Bauman continues to write about ethics in postmodern times:

Human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live; and yet, as if defying the worried philosophers who cannot conceive of an 'unprincipled' morality, a morality without foundations, we demonstrate day by day that we can live, or learn to live, or manage

¹⁵ His concept of the world as a dog-eat-dog world sounds like Thomas Hobbes's notion "that man to man is an arrant wolf" (Hobbes 89).

to live in such a world, though few of us would be ready to spell out, if asked, what the principles that guide us are, and fewer still would have heard about the 'foundations' which we allegedly cannot do without to be good and kind to each other.

Knowing that to be the truth (or just intuiting it, or going on as if one knew it) is to be postmodern. Postmodernity, one may say, is modernity without illusions (the obverse of which is that modernity is postmodernity refusing to accept its own truth). The illusions in question boil down to the belief that the 'messiness' of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason. (32)

Bauman argues that in postmodern times, truth is to adhere to a morality with no explainable foundation. People live in a preliminary status according to inexplicable moral guidelines. Thus, ethics has become a recurring issue that has not only shaped postmodern literature from the eighties on, but also the reading of texts, as Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung argue in their introduction to *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism*: "This moral turn of postmodernism in the 1980s, however, is not only the recognition of a new direction in literature and the arts but first and foremost a new form of reading spurred on by the realization of the unavoidability of moral issues" (v). Calvin lives in such a postmodern world: He realizes the messiness of human reality, and he accepts the ambivalence of ethical principles. His morality has no foundation, and Calvin demonstrates the limitations of this worldview; as there are no external parameters, he defines morality himself. As a selfish six-year-old boy, he is willing to relativize and even bend morality to satisfy his materialistic desire for instant gratification. As he bluntly states his selfishness and carries it to extremes, his philosophy turns into a parody of the postmodern worldview.

Calvin and Hobbes discusses morality from multiple viewpoints without necessarily coming to conclusions. Calvin and Hobbes do exactly this, as they discuss the issue of morality in a postmodern world and its logical effects from various angles. However, the comics never provide any answers. They merely observe the limits of relativizing morality without answering the question of what moral behavior *is*.

“You’re still wrong”: Calvin and Other People

Calvin’s moral understanding does not only affect his own life, but also impacts his surroundings. He forces his morality upon his surroundings, which shapes his viewpoints and interactions with other people. Following the Biblical argument, John Calvin emphasized that, after the fall of man, humankind became incapable of keeping relationships (Rohloff 68). Similarly, Calvin does not get along well with other people. As he himself defines morality, (1) he would not let other people tell him what to do, (2) but also moralizes people who do not act according to his understanding. He draws the conclusion that (3) he wants to be left alone while at the same time admitting that man cannot be alone.

Calvin does not accept any good advice. Bill Watterson illustrates this trait when Calvin’s father tries to teach Calvin to see “both sides of the issue! Then poor Calvin began to see both sides of EVERYTHING!” Accordingly, Calvin’s world all of a sudden turns into a “Neo-Cubistic” world – Calvin’s new interpretation of Cubism: He finds himself within the Cubist painting with multiple perspectives, and Calvin complains that the multiple views provide too much information, which makes it impossible for him to move. In the end, when he finds himself again in his single perspective, he tells his dad: “You’re still wrong” (see: p. 206). Cubism played with the fracturing of perspective by breaking up a picture and piecing it together in a new fragmented reality, thus abandoning the subjective viewpoint (Gay 181).¹⁶ Artistically, Watterson successfully translates the cross-reference to a modernist art movement into a visible worldview. This brilliant artistic device illustrates Watterson’s message of the comic strip – namely the importance of regarding issues from different angles – and also uses the graphic features to their fullest extent. Calvin understands that he is limited in his own perspective, yet he refuses to see issues from other viewpoints as he fears he would lose from doing so (*Indis* 248).

Additionally, Calvin easily becomes impatient with people who get in his way or do not want to play according to his rules. His impatience and capriciousness is reflected in various comic strips. When Calvin is

¹⁶ Here, the influence of Lyonel Feininger, whom Watterson called one of his artistic influences, can be seen.



in a bad mood he wants Hobbes to move out of his way. When Hobbes refuses, he threatens to beat him up instead (*Author* 251); when Calvin wants to sell his product, “A swift kick in the butt. \$1.00,” he does not

find buyers (*Packed* 120);¹⁷ he advises Susie to “step in front of a cement mixer, ok?” because he is in a bad mood (*Indis* 56). Calvin usually does not do set new year’s resolutions, but he wants the rest of the world to change or adjust to him. One year he claims that he does not need to change because he deems himself perfect: “For your information, I’m STAYING like this, and everyone else can just get USED to it! If people don’t like me the way I am, well TOUGH beans! It’s a free country! I don’t need anyone’s permission to be the way I want! This is how I am – take it or leave it!” (*Indis* 179). Again, the text floats over five Calvins: Calvin shouts in anger, stretches his fist, and stands there with his hands on his hips. Calvin’s argumentation comes to an abrupt end when he finds himself alone because Hobbes decided to leave during his outburst of egocentrism. Although Hobbes does what Calvin demands, Calvin is not content with it either, and he complains, “HE should resolve to be more attentive when someone is speaking.” Calvin cannot accept that Hobbes is consequent enough to follow Calvin’s advice and still wants Hobbes to adjust to his views.

Calvin pursues his mission to change people around him, his only new year’s resolution. While daringly speeding down a hill on his sleigh, Calvin recommends a “complete character overhaul” for everyone he knows. “That’s why I’ll spend the remaining days of this year telling people what I hate about them and how they should change” (*Cat* 36). The panel in which he says that is round and Calvin and Hobbes fall off their sleigh as they hit a tree. The reader sees them from a worm’s perspective, and at that very moment, Calvin’s advice does not seem very trustworthy. In the last panel, Hobbes climbs out of the frozen puddle and feels that Calvin’s character also needs some overhaul, as he says, “Some of us would be happy to reciprocate.” Calvin declines, “Sorry, MY new year’s resolution is not to change a bit.”¹⁸ Calvin for

¹⁷ Calvin gets frustrated over his business that is not going well because “Everybody I know needs what I’m selling.”

¹⁸ The entire comic strip is graphically interesting as it consists of two major panels that are held together by a dark green frame with the color of fir trees as in the woods. Two additional panels loom over the green frame as if they did not entirely belong into the narration, and a third panel has an unusual round form. The entire appearance is more like a collage rather than a comic strip that features one panel after the other. The panel form corresponds with the staccato narration of the two sledging down the hill.

his part refuses to accept any advice for his life from other people, not even from Hobbes. The irony in his worldview is that he is always exempt from anything he suggests to others.

And yet, Calvin has to accept his dependence on other people. Even his plan to leave society and live “a million miles away from everyone” because “people are rotten” does not work entirely without other people, and Calvin reckons, “Well, Mom could come by twice a day to cook I suppose” (*Indis* 33). Calvin lives with the unresolved tension between wanting to get rid of people, as they do not please him, and at the same time being dependent on his surroundings.

Reiner Rohloff summarizes John Calvin’s conception of man by saying that man needs a counterpart. With the Fall of Man, man failed to be the image of God. “Das ist keine Eigenschaft, sondern ein *Auftrag*: in einer *intakten Beziehung* zu Gott und den Mitgeschöpfen leben. Um diese Beziehung wiederherzustellen, braucht der Mensch ein Gegenüber. Dieses Gegenüber ist Gott“ (68). For John Calvin, the centerpiece of his concept of mankind is an intact relationship with God that will heal man from his brokenness. In the comics, Calvin’s understanding of man is quite different: It shows man’s desire for independence. Calvin’s so-called independence, however, results in a mess: He does not find any satisfying answer to questions on the state of man, on how to justify any but his own morality or how to come to terms with other people. In that way, he reflects postmodern ethics by living and enduring the tension of the unsolved questions claimed by Bauman. However, the lunacy with which Calvin uses the postmodern rhetoric only to spread and foster his egocentrism makes Calvin’s worldview a parody of postmodernism.

5.2.3 “... life’s a lot more fun when you’re not responsible for your actions”: Predestination vs. Free Will

Predestination, one of the major parts of John Calvin’s theological understanding, embraces the thought that God in his divine power elects those who are saved:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained

to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death (*Institutes* 2, 206).

As the Puritans shaped American culture, so did the concept of predestination.¹⁹ Though theologically, John Calvin's view has been criticized from a Biblical viewpoint (Horton and Edwards 23), the question underneath is a question fundamental to mankind: whether humankind has a free will. America is the country that firmly promises the free "pursuit of happiness," and the popular Horatio Alger slogan "from rags to riches" advertises America as a country that offers a better life for those who just work hard enough. Thus, it is an individual's free choice to work hard enough to determine his or her own destiny – be it failure or success.

Despite optimistic propagations, American reality proves to be different. Social injustice, racism, and inequality are issues in the twentieth century and still are dominant issues in public discourse. There is still a prevailing discrepancy between the American success story and realities in American culture. *Calvin and Hobbes* discusses the ambiguity of determining one's own fate versus being caught in structures beyond one's power. When Calvin ponders the question of predestination, he leaves out the transcendental component, thus thinking of it more as naturalistic determinism. He discusses advantages and disadvantages, but since he cannot come to an explicit conclusion, he decides to utilize the concept of determinism to his own benefit.

The theological concept of predestination is the causal relation of events to a larger plan that brings together seemingly incoherent and disconnected events, which makes them part of a larger plan. To grasp the concept of predestination better, Calvin turns to the past and philosophizes about the larger correlation of events in history: "History is the fiction we invent to persuade ourselves that events are knowable and that life has order and direction." Calvin believes that the attempt to place historical events in a causal order is merely fiction, and that there

¹⁹ However, the modern criticism of this concept – that predestination would make man helpless and fearful because the end is already determined – was not a conclusion of John Calvin. Rather, the thought of predestination was a comforting thought for the Huguenots and the Puritans, and less the concept of a wilful God arbitrarily interfering into man's life. (cf. Rohloff 84).

is no larger plan behind individual events in history. Wisely, he adds, "That's why events are always reinterpreted when values change. We need new versions of history to allow for our current prejudices" (*Cat* 152). Yet he uses the concept to his own benefit: As people seem to believe in this fiction, he decides to write his own "revisionist autobiography." The human desire to make things explainable, the desire to lend the chaotic world a structure and a pattern leads Calvin to become the author of his own time by inventing his own storyline for his life.²⁰

Although not convinced of it himself, Calvin provides his own narrative of how (world) history is an inescapable force in his life: "Everything and everyone serves history's single purpose." Curious, Hobbes asks, "And what is that purpose?" "Why, to produce ME, of course! I'm the end result of history" (*Indis* 155). John Calvin would have described this egocentrism as the sin of hubris: "... if you ask me in regard to the precepts of the Christian Religion, I will answer, first, second, and third, Humility.' By humility he [St. Augustine] means not when a man, with a consciousness of some virtue, refrains from pride, but when he truly feels that he has no refuge but in humility" (*Institutes* 1, 232). Calvin, in the most unhumble manner, is convinced of his being the peak of mankind, and so he states, "Now I'm here, and history is vindicated." Skeptical of Calvin's magnificent role in history, Hobbes asks, "So now that history's brought you, what are you going to do?" The next panel that shows Calvin and Hobbes laughing in front of TV shows the irony hidden behind the dialogue of the two (*Indis* 155). His overstated self-conception depicts the discrepancy between his self-conception and his life as a snotty six-year-old; the discrepancy between Calvin's overconfidence including a world that orbits around him only, and the priorities of a six-year-old with entertainment for amusement. On the one hand, he

²⁰ Interestingly, this is also a reference to the eighties. Historical revisionism boomed in the seventies and eighties, and it was a term especially associated with Holocaust deniers. The California-based Institute for Historical Review that promoted Holocaust denial was founded in 1978 and grew popular in the eighties. However, they distanced themselves from that (<http://www.ihr.org/main/about.shtml>). In the mid-eighties, the so-called *Historikerstreit* aroused about the question of German guilt in the Third Reich and whether the Holocaust had been the logical consequence of previous historical happenings ("About the IHR").

deems history fiction: he uses that concept of fiction to invent a narrative for his own past in order to lend his life more importance. Calvin's interpretation of history is another reference to the Puritan mindset. Like Calvin, the Puritans did not only read natural anomalies as divine signs, but also interpreted history as a divine narrative. The Puritan Indian policy, for instance, was placed within a whole framework of divine providence, as "the sponsorship of Indian missions by the colonies represented an effort to acculturate the Indians to English ways as well as to convert them; . . ." (Slotkin and Folsom 27). In that respect, the Puritans decoded history as God's way of communicating with mankind. However, there is another difference between the God-fearing Puritans and Calvin. Although both the Puritans and Watterson's Calvin impose a narrative on their view of history and read personal experiences as evidence for divine benevolence or wrath, Calvin's interpretation reveals a postmodern unpredictability: As there is no reliable God, no dependable constant, Calvin's interpretation becomes arbitrary.

However, Calvin does not only think about the randomness of events in the past, but also ponders about the possibility of the stars controlling his destiny and the narrative of the future. Hobbes does not buy it: "I think we can do whatever we want with our lives" (*CnH* 41). As Calvin and Hobbes stare into the darkness and both think about that statement, Calvin replies, "Not to hear Mom and Dad tell it." Calvin is aware of the fact that – although he wishes he was – his life is not entirely independent from external influences he has no power over, which in his case are his parents. Calvin encounters the impact of external forces he cannot escape in the shape of social structures on a daily basis. Calvin has to obey his parents, his father seems to harass him with unnecessary chores merely to build his character, his parents determine his bedtime, and his teacher Mrs. Wormwood tries to force him to learn things that Calvin is not interested in (and that he successfully refuses to learn). Calvin feels that society – and thus external forces, although not a god in the theological sense – actively impact his life. Since he feels that he cannot escape them, Calvin eventually wilfully decides to embrace the concept of his life being predestined for his own benefit. He bluntly admits in a different comic strip that he believes his life to be determined by the stars because "life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions" (*Author* 152). Calvin's sassy reply reveals an underlying ego-

centrism that has nothing to do with a worldview or a belief system, but more with the desire for a carefree life.

Calvin tries not to conceal the egocentrism that drives him. Similarly, he does not want to hear about responsibility because him being born was enough to make the world a better place (*Packed* 128). Calvin refrains from taking any responsibility for his life, and so he smilingly explains to Hobbes that “Nothing I do is my fault. My family is dysfunctional and my parents won’t empower me! Consequently, I’m not self-actualized! My behavior is addictive functioning in a disease process of toxic codependency! I need holistic healing and wellness before I’ll accept any responsibility for my actions!” (*Cat* 50). Stunned at this tidal wave of psychological buzzwords, Hobbes replies, “One of us needs to stick his head in a bucket of ice water.” Again, Hobbes is on the quiet but critical side and points to the absurdity of Calvin’s argumentation and the utilization of the power of social structures as an argument for his own benefit. As he wanders off, Calvin says, “I love the culture of victimhood,” revealing that Calvin merely uses the rhetoric to suit himself.

However, there are occasions when he is confronted with the downside of this carefully constructed culture of victimhood: When Calvin explains to Hobbes that he has decided to be a fatalist, because everything is “preordained” and nothing that happens will be his fault, Hobbes visualizes the egocentrism that lies underneath by tripping Calvin, who then falls into the mud. Hobbes bends down to Calvin and explains, “Too bad you were fated to do that.” Calvin admits, “THAT WASN’T FATE!” (*Author* 178).

The question of predestination contains an indissoluble tension as it requires more than a yes-or-no answer. Newspaper comic strips as an open narrative form are able to discuss that question from different angles without aiming to find a clear-cut answer or jump to conclusions. The Comic Mode allows them a humorous and yet tragic discussion of that complex issue: the reader laughs how Hobbes immediately translates Calvin’s philosophy into action and explains his mean action by “fate.” On the other hand, the reader gets to see the arbitrariness of Calvin’s philosophy, as Calvin does not want his inferiority and him being the victim of Hobbes attack to be regarded as fate. Calvin raises the complexity of the issue, but instead of seriously pondering the question, he finds a pragmatic and humorous answer by doing a cost-benefit

calculation: He feels that he can benefit more from a worldview in which his life is predetermined by external forces. So, he deliberately ignores all the complex facets of the issue and finds a simplistic answer that is merely based on human egocentrism. Only when he gets the short end of the stick, he admits the inconsequence of his worldview.

5.2.4 “What a stupid world”: Human Suffering

In his cost-benefit calculation, Calvin omits one factor, suffering, and so he wonders why people have to suffer on earth. However, unlike the question of predestination that mostly culminates in a punch line and reveals Calvin’s exorbitant self-conception, the comic strips about suffering have a less humorous ring to them. Watterson does not lightheartedly tackle the issue of suffering with a punch line at the end, but with sincerity.

There is one central story in which, over nine daily comic strips, death and suffering are discussed. It is the story of Calvin and Hobbes finding a little injured raccoon that eventually dies after a few days. In the *Tenth Anniversary Book*, Watterson reflects on the topic of death:

Most of my earlier strips had simple gags, so this was a big departure in tone. Death, of course, is not a common subject for a ‘kid’ strip. This story not only revealed new facets of Calvin’s personality but it also suggested to me that the strip was broad enough to handle a wide range of subjects, ideas, and emotions. The strip’s world suddenly opened up. (*Tenth* 37)

The strip does not only reveal the potential of the medium, but the reaction by the readership shows how unusual it is for a newspaper comic artist to incorporate topics of such depth. The series provoked both positive and negative reactions from the readership. Readers empathized with Calvin’s grief, as one reader wrote, “Please don’t let the little racoon die and break Calvin’s heart and mine!” (“Postcard”) or another: “However – I was very disturbed by the recent death of a little racoon. I guess I don’t expect these subjects to appear in the comics. This is not a criticism, because I felt that your insight and expression for both Calvin & Hobbes was terrific. I guess I just hated to see the racoon die! I was pulling for him” (“Reader from Miami”). Another reader

writes about how she coped with the death of her own son, and wrote: "Thank you for your very moving and painful and searching story about something that sooner or later is faced by all of us" ("Letter March 18, 1989"). Other readers, however, were less empathetic and felt that Bill Watterson went too far in dealing with that topic: "... the world gives me enough reasons to cry. Every day we find a loss or at least a struggle to deal with out here. I lose enough in the real world. Why in the world would you kill a raccoon in your strip? If you need a new character in your strip, do it some other way. If you're not going to bring that raccoon back – shame on you!!" ("Letter 3-16-87"). The diversity of the reader's reactions shows how the comic strip about death goes beyond Watterson's usual comic style.

Watterson's comic strips about suffering always end with a sense of helplessness. Over five dailies, Calvin, Hobbes, and Calvin's parents try to save the raccoon's life, but in the sixth daily strip, Calvin's father tells Calvin that the raccoon has died: "... I'm afraid he died. I'm sorry, kiddo. But he didn't have much of a chance. At least he died warm and safe, Calvin. We did all we could, but now he's gone" (*Drooling* 95). In the following three dailies, Calvin and Hobbes try to cope with death. In the first, Calvin stands at the place where his father buried the raccoon, and takes leave of it: "I didn't even know he existed a few days ago and now he's gone forever. It's like I found him for no reason. I had to say good-bye as soon as I said hello. Still ... in a sad, awful, terribly way, I'm happy I met him. *sniff*" The helplessness toward the uncertainty of life is summarized by Calvin in the last panel: "What a stupid world" (*Drooling* 96). In this panel, Calvin and Hobbes are seen from the back leaving the place where the raccoon was buried. They return home to their own lives. There is no punch line to conclude the comic strip, and Calvin's and Hobbes's only reaction is admitting that the world is "stupid": it does not always make sense, and some questions just remain unanswered.

The following daily, in which Calvin and Hobbes discuss the raccoon's death, is set when Calvin and Hobbes are in bed. Calvin asks, "You know, Hobbes, I can't figure out this death stuff. Why did that little raccoon have to die? He didn't do anything wrong. He was just little! What's the point of putting him here and taking him back so soon?" (*Drooling* 96). Here, Calvin does not take leave of the raccoon, but rather generalizes the question of death: Why do people have to



suffer even if they have done nothing wrong? Calvin also raises this question in an earlier comic strip when he loses Hobbes outside. He wonders: “*sniff* ... What did I ever do to deserve this?” (*CnH* 91). Theologically, the question would be summed up as Theodicy: How can a good God allow his creation to suffer? However, without a clear notion of God, the question turns into an overwhelmingly large and unanswerable problem for Calvin: In the last panel, Calvin and Hobbes are under the bed, frightened. Calvin says, “It’s either mean or it’s arbitrary, and either way I’ve got the heebie-jeebies” (*Drooling* 96). This unanswerable question scares Calvin, and his reaction is that of a regular child that is unable to cope with an overwhelming issue. He tries to run away from the question by hiding. Again the comic strip concludes without a punch line and with the tension of an unanswered question.

The third and final comic strip that discusses the death of the raccoon is set again in the woods, where Calvin and Hobbes philosophize about life and death: “Mom says death is as natural as birth, and it’s all part of the life cycle. She says we don’t understand it, but there are many things we don’t understand, and we just have to do the best we can with the knowledge we have. I guess that makes sense” (*Drooling* 96). Calvin has to accept that suffering is part of life, just as he has to accept on new year’s morning that the world has not changed; it is still “pollution and war and stupidity and greed! Things haven’t changed!” (*Killer* 84).²¹ This time, Calvin and Hobbes are not merely overwhelmed by the question for suffering. Instead, they attempt to give an answer: Hobbes hugs Calvin, and Calvin says, “... but don’t YOU go anywhere.” And Hobbes replies, “Don’t worry.” The panel carries quietness and a sense of com-

²¹ However, here Calvin continues to complain, “I say what kind of future IS this? I thought things were supposed to improve!” Hobbes laconic answer is, “The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present.”

fort. Although the comic strip does not alleviate the tension of the question of suffering, it conveys a sense of having found a way to cope by finding comfort in friendship.



Calvin approaches death from three different angles: By taking leave of the raccoon and concluding that the world is “stupid,” by posing the question of justice – why does an innocent creature have to die? – and by accepting that life and death do not make sense. His helplessness, however, culminates in the insight that the only value in life lies in friendship. For Calvin, friendship is the only valuable good in his distorted world with broken values driven by materialism. His friendship to Hobbes is what carries Calvin through and what gives him stability in this shattered world. It is also what lends the comic strips profoundness.

“Best presents don’t come in boxes”: The Value of Friendship

Although Watterson’s Calvin proves over and over again that he is driven by materialism and that he does not believe in truth or values, he holds on to his friendship with Hobbes as an ultimate good: A “tiger hug” is capable of substituting the Christmas presents that are so important for Calvin (*CnH* 22), and Hobbes explains that “the best presents don’t come in boxes” (*Indis* 20). Friendship is what helps Calvin cope with fear (“Things are never quite as scary when you’ve got a best friend” [*Indis* 77]), and comforts him (Calvin says, “You know, sometimes the world seems like a pretty mean place,” and Hobbes replies, “That’s why animals are so soft and huggy.” In the next panel, the two hug each other, and Calvin sighs, “...yeah...” (*Indis* 137). For Calvin, the comforter and friend is an animal – he seeks his comfort in the non-human. In one comic strip, Calvin even complains about other people – “People are jerks,” he grumbles (*Author* 234). Hobbes, however, con-

vinces him of the beauty of togetherness: “Sometimes they are, but look at all the colors on the trees today. I think it’s more fun to see something like this WITH someone than just by yourself.” There are two panels in which Hobbes smiles and looks at Calvin. In the first of the two panels, Calvin still looks grumpy; he then looks into Hobbes’s eyes. As both continue to stroll through the woods and balance on a trunk over a creek, Calvin admits, “I GUESSSS so... But I’d still rather see this with a tiger than a person.” Calvin admits that he needs company, but still he seeks his company and true comfort in the non-human world. Hobbes agrees, “Well, THAT goes without saying.” Just like the comic strips about death, the ones about friendship hardly aim to deliver a punch line. However, whereas the strips about death end with the tension of an unsolved question, the strips on friendship evoke calmness and contentment. In the 2015 interview, Watterson reflects on the series of *Calvin and Hobbes*:

I remember very early on in the strip, Rich West said, ‘I think this strip is about friendship,’ and that sort of surprised me, because I hadn’t thought about the strip on those terms. I never sat down with the intention of writing about friendship; I sat down to write about this little kid and a tiger, and the friendship was what came out. (13)

In Calvin’s relative worldview, friendship is the only absolute constant. It is the one thing that trumps everything, even his materialism. It is the only point where Calvin comes to peace and loses his restlessness and discontentment.

5.2.5 Summary

Calvin and Hobbes raise fundamental philosophical and theological questions and place them in the context of a postmodern world. However, through the medium of the comics, Watterson parodies postmodern ethics. He takes on individual notions and shows their craziness by placing them in his little suburban world and exaggerating them. In the end, Calvin uses postmodern rhetoric only as a means to justify his underlying selfishness. In all these beliefs – be it in a god, in his self-conception of man, in free will or predestination – Calvin is not driven by finding truth, but merely by egocentrism. He does not care if he con-

tradicts himself, and the utilization of these incongruous concepts to defend his egocentrism is what determines the humor of the comics. This is a narrative technique possible in comic strips through the Comic Mode: Although Calvin's philosophy is full of contradictions, the comic strips in their entirety appear as one coherent piece of art and not as a fragmented narrative. Therefore, the medium and the message relate to one another and make the comic strips successful.

Calvin's diffuse concept of the universe communicating to him through the weather as well as the power of Santa Claus and commercialism determine his image of man: Santa's demand to be good encourages Calvin to use the postmodern rhetoric to redefine morality to suit his needs. As he misuses the rhetoric to satisfy his egocentrism and greed, he reveals the loopholes of the rhetoric. He parodies the selfishness of the "Me Generation" by entirely dismissing any higher ideals and always opting for the path most convenient and suitable to him. As a result, his morality is always a means to serve himself, and his concept of god and of man is full of contradictions. But Calvin does not care about that. Consequently, his questions about man's free will are never fully answered. He realizes that he is influenced by external factors, and so he fully embraces the concept of predestination, but only to disclaim any personal responsibility.

Within this parody of postmodern philosophy, despite the entertaining discrepancies of Calvin's worldview, the comic strips also convey seriousness. When it comes to the question of suffering and death, Watterson foregoes any punch lines and any egocentrism and admits to human helplessness. Friendship is the only reliable pillar in the shattered and relativizing postmodern world he pokes fun at. The transcendental – or vertical – relationship between God and man that is essential for John Calvin turns into an empty rhetoric in Watterson's parody of postmodern philosophy: the vertical relationship is replaced by a horizontal relationship, in Calvin's case to a non-human. It is the same means that Archibald MacLeish uses in his play *J.B.*, a modern retelling of the story of Job: In the play, the modern Job, called J.B., is a banker and loses his children. However, the restoration of J.B. in the end does not happen through an encounter with God as the Biblical Job experiences it:

Nicht der *a priori* existierende Gott, dem wir im Buch Hiob begegnen, sondern ein lediglich durch die menschliche Liebe immer wieder neu zu

setzender Gottesbegriff bestimmt das Gottesbild von J.B. So wie der Entschluß J.B.s, den Selbstmordeinflüsterungen Nickles' zu widerstehen, menschlicher Willenskraft entspringt, ist die Liebe, durch die J.B. und Sarah sich vornehmen, das Leid zu überwinden, eine – wie häufig hervorgehoben wurde – allein vom Menschen ausgehende und auf den Menschen bezogene. (Siebald 772)

In the same way that J.B. replaces the image of God with human love, the only response Calvin and Hobbes can offer to the shattered postmodern ethic is human friendship – the most unselfish part of human life. In that respect, the comics raise the question of the vertical – that is, the transcendental – relationship that they constantly mock and parody, even to an absurd degree, but the only answer the comics can give is on a horizontal level. In the end, the answer provided by the postmodern world is not a consistent and fully satisfying answer, but rather a postmodern attempt to find answers and to endure unsolved riddles.

5.3 “I’m a suburban post-modernist”: Art

In his few interviews and speeches, Watterson emphasizes his understanding of art: He considers the modernist artists to be his role models. So modernism is not only reflected in the medium itself newspaper comic strips are a genre that uses modern narrative techniques (cf. ch. 4.2.2) but also in Watterson's self-conception as an artist. As Calvin also becomes active as an artist, art is not only something Watterson speaks about in the interviews, but he also incorporates that in the comics. His self-conception as an artist, however, as well as the art he creates is postmodern – he describes himself as a “suburban postmodernist” (*Magical* 67). Watterson uses a modern medium to discuss postmodern art, but not in a serious manner. Watterson uses Calvin as an outlet through which to poke fun at the contemporary art world: “For some time, I’ve used Calvin’s snowmen as a way to make fun at the art world. I enjoy studying art, but the field certainly attracts its share of pretentious blowhards” (*Tenth* 166). Whereas Watterson derives his self-conception from the modern artists in order to create serious art to comment on the time and age he lives in, he uses Calvin to parody postmodern art and debunk its empty rhetoric. As postmodern art is considered to be a continuation of modern art, Watterson ridicules the degeneration of the

world of art throughout the twentieth century from modernism to post-modernism. In order to grasp the dynamics of Watterson's reverence for the modernist artists as well as his self-conception as a modern artist, the interrelation between modern and postmodern art will first be analyzed.

5.3.1 Modern and Postmodern Art: An Introduction

As Watterson did not give many public statements and interviews, little is also known about his artistic role models. Only in one interview with Richard West in 1989, when Watterson was asked about his artistic role models, he replied:

I enjoy the work of the German expressionists, particularly the woodcuts of the Bruecke group and Lyonel Feininger. Egon Schiele is also a favorite. I find all of his work very immediate and honest, and I suppose I respond most to the directness and rawness of these images. (Interview West 70-71)²²

It is the only time Watterson gives explicit names outside of the world of comic artists. Although it is a brief statement, it is telling: Watterson names modern artists – of which Lyonel Feininger started off his career as a newspaper comic artist – as his artistic role models. Unsurprisingly, Watterson's self-conception as an artist contains many elements of the modern artist self-conception.²³ Calvin, however, categorizes himself as

²² Unfortunately, since there are very few public statements by Watterson, this is all that is known about his artistic role models. Watterson also names *Krazy Kat*, *Pogo* and *Peanuts* as his comic strip examples.

²³ The artists Watterson refers to as his artistic models were as scandalous as they were original in their time: Egon Schiele's artworks with his characteristic raw brushstroke portray mostly nude and deformed acts to show the inner conflict of modern man; Lyonel Feininger, a transnational Cubist artist who left Nazi Germany in 1937, began his career as a newspaper comic artist and then turned to the fractured perspectives of Cubism that in combination with his carefully chosen harmonious color palette have a ring of harmonious mess; and the "Bruecke" group called for a new and young generation of art creators to which the artist belongs who "immediately and unaltered renders what presses him to create" ("Der gehört zu uns, der unmittelbar und unverfälscht wiedergibt, was ihn zum

a “suburban postmodernist” (*Magical* 67). As post-modern art is considered to be the continuation of modern art, the two art movements and their interrelation will first be approached in their respective historical and social context.

Whereas modernity in a historical sense can also refer to the developments since the sixteenth century (Cahoone 11),²⁴ modernism in an artistic sense has a distinct context in art history: It is a collective term for the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in that context, is defined as ‘the tradition of the new’: “It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster” (Childs 2). That diversity is what makes modernism hard to grasp as it contains various ideas that manifest themselves in different forms and shapes – modernism unites such aesthetically diverse art movements as Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, or Expressionism.

The various modern art movements are held together by one common theme summarized in Ezra Pound’s 1934 book title for a collection of essays: *Make It New*. Modern artists were concerned with anything that was unthinkable and shocking, anything that presented novelty and

Schaffen drängt” [Remm 21]). Members of the Bruecke were among others, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, and Emil Nolde. The Bruecke was influenced by one famous artist, Paul Gauguin, and he is one of the few people who are mentioned by name in the comics: Calvin refers to Paul Gauguin in one comic strip when he proclaims, “Paul Gauguin asked, ‘Whence do we come? What are we? Where are we going?’ Well, I don’t know about anyone else, but *I* came from my room. I’m a kid with big plans, And I’m going outside! See ya later!” His mother looks very puzzled, when Calvin sticks his head in at the door and says: “Say, who the heck is Paul Gauguin anyway?” (*Packed* 69). Again, this tiny but outstanding reference to an art movement outside the comics shows the major role the Expressionists play, and it also shows Calvin’s little understanding of the context.

²⁴ “Modernity” has, according to Cahoone, a “relatively fixed reference in contemporary intellectual discussion. It refers to the new civilization developed in Europe and North America over the last several centuries and fully evident by the early twentieth century” (11).

had not been there before. During the complex time in which people had to cope with the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the social and political confusions of the Great War, artists cried out for honesty instead of romanticization.²⁵ Modernism is the aesthetic expression of the horrors of the (approaching) Great War that was to shatter all of Europe and traumatize and dehumanize a whole generation. Therefore, the age has become known as the age of the 'transvaluation of values' (Berghahn 234) and the 'Disenchantment of the World' (Weber 9). The use of gas during the Great War led to an entirely new and impersonal warfare, a dehumanization that was geared toward complete destruction of the enemy. This also led to a new dehumanized idea of man, as Otto Dix expresses in his mixed media painting "Shock Troops Advance under Gas" ("Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor" [1924]): The soldiers wearing gas masks look inhuman and frightening, and it is impossible to identify any personal characteristics (Dix).

Modern artists are characterized by introspection as they turn inward to express their subjective sensation in their art (Gay 25-26). As artists then attempted to express the inexpressible and used their art as an emotional outlet for the challenges modern times posed to the individual, they moved in their painting style away from representational painting into abstraction. It was a visual response to this new peak of horror that led the artists to break with familiar concepts concerning form, content, and self-conception (Gay 25). This new and dehumanized view of man is, of course, reflected in the visual representation of man: Man turns into a machine with distorted proportions and angular shapes. The visual representation of man as a holistic and harmonic entity is replaced by a fragmented presentation of man and mechanical movement. Marcel Duchamp's painting "Nude Descending a Staircase" (which is an artwork Watterson explicitly refers to in his comic twice) is such a visual

²⁵ The very core idea of the mechanical age, that man becomes fragmented, is a turn away from the humanistic ideal to a progressive forward-looking perspective in which the mechanics of human existence are displayed: "Note that I am not saying that humanity or gentleness is never present in the techniques of modern art, but that as these techniques advanced, humanity was increasingly fragmented – as we shall see, for example with Marcel Duchamp. The artists carried the idea of a fragmented reality onto the canvas... Duchamp realized that the absurdity of all things includes the absurdity of art itself" (Schaeffer 187/190).

rendering of a fragmented image of a man (hardly recognizable as a human being) in which body parts overlap and movement is fractured into individual steps.

Despite a common orientation, modernism was shaped by its heterogeneity. Various different art movements arose, and in order to distinguish one from the other, artists began to define themselves by defining their own art movements, their own so-called “-isms.”²⁶ As their art moved into abstraction and became less self-explanatory to the uninformed audience, the artists took on the function of mediators between the art and the audience and extended their function from artists to art critics. This new need to explain art to the outside world led to a rise of manifestos in which artists explained their artistic position and their artworks. Interestingly, the role of the audience shifted from an outsider who needs to be informed about the art in modern art to a new alliance of the artist and the audience in postmodern art.

Postmodernism then describes the playful continuation and modification of modernism. Like modernism, “postmodern” is a rather broad term, defined by Graves-Smith and Chilvers as a term “that has been used in a broad and diffuse way, with reference to a wide range of cultural phenomena to characterize a move away – beginning about 1960 – from the seriousness of modernism in favour of a more eclectic and populist approach to creativity” (“Postmodernism”). Although the term was first used to describe developments in the fields of architecture in the seventies, it was later applied to other fields, such as literature and music – and the field of art (Pohl 540). In that particular context of art, “postmodern” describes a transformation from modern art of the early twentieth century to a new form of art – the post-modern, which is expressed in new forms like performances, happenings, and the incorporation of new media like film (cf. Ursprung 12). Thus, postmodernism is less a descriptive term to summarize a certain style than a demarcation from modernism. A second term describes art in particular from the sixties on: “contemporary art.” Meyer suggests that the term “contempo-

²⁶ Of course, this was less harmonious and often led to competition among artists, and modern artists soon became known for criticizing one another publicly, as for instance the Spanish painter Salvador Dali, who provocatively announced that he was determined to save art from the emptiness of modern art (cf. Gay 36).

rary” always has to be seen in reference to something else: Maurizio Nannucci’s neon work “All art has been contemporary” reminds us that “all historical art was once current and that all contemporary art will soon be historical” (Meyer 24/25). As the analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* is concerned with placing the series in the postmodern world of the eighties and nineties, I will furthermore refer to the term “postmodern art” – not the least because Bill Watterson regards the modern artists of the early twentieth century as his role models. Calvin’s art is a continuation and expansion of Watterson’s notion of art. So in order to focus on the relation of Watterson’s and Calvin’s notions of art, the terms “modern art” and “postmodern art” are used.

As the transition from modern to postmodern art – or contemporary art – is a smooth one rather than defined by one turning point, there are even difficulties to define a time frame: Whereas Ursprung refers to art from the sixties (13), Robert Cumming, Adjunct Professor of Art History at Boston University, refers to contemporary art as the art from the seventies on (370). Terry Smith dates contemporary art to the late eighties (2009, qtd. in Meyer 15). Frances K. Pohl omits the debate altogether by using historical landmarks to extend the time frame from 1946-2012, using the headline “From Cold War to Culture War” (457). As *Calvin and Hobbes* was published in the eighties and nineties, I will not refer to art younger than that time frame. For this purpose, I refer to Philip Ursprung, who sets the starting point in the late fifties and sixties with the beginning of globalization as the beginning of contemporary art (10). After WWII, the center of the art world shifted from Europe to North America, whose soil had been spared during the war. While Europe recovered from the two World Wars, many artists emigrated to the U.S.. New York turned into the new hub for artists (cf. Bonnet 29) with the New York School (Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock).

Postmodernism still contains elements that originated in the early twentieth century – such as abstraction, the invention of art movements, the written expression of the artistic self in the form of manifestos/artist statements, etc. What changed, however, in the art of the late twentieth century, is the role of the audience. Until the fifties, art was created for an elitist circle, the “artist’s world.” In the sixties, the turn toward the audience created the “art world,” a community of artists, buyers, sellers, art critics, curators, and of a growing interested audience. In his essay, “The Artist as a Man of the World,” Allan Kaprow writes about the

changing role of the audience: "Society nowadays – at least a rapidly growing part of it – pursues artists instead of exiling them... What has been called the art public is no longer a select, small group upon whom artists can depend for a stock response, favorable or otherwise. It is now a large diffused mass..." (49; 54). The chasm between the artist and the audience disappeared, and so Ursprung argues: "Der Motor der Veränderung [in den Sechzigern] ist, so meine These, der Kampf um die Aufmerksamkeit eines wachsenden Publikums sowie um die Ressource 'Gegenwart'" (19). Art did not happen in a secluded cosmos any longer; reality and art merged into one new entity. Action painting, a term closely related to Jackson Pollock in the fifties, was the first step in taking art to a performing level. This performance is later expressed in happenings (first introduced by Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* in 1959, in which the audience became actors in his performance), or performances themselves. The Fluxus movement is the embodiment of a shift from aesthetics to ethics, as artists began to ignore art theory, and rather created mixed-media works. In the Fluxus movement, artistic exploration as well as socio-political activism shifted to the foreground, as did the importance of the artist's actions, opinions and emotions rather than the actual creation (Cumming 347). Although modern art moved into abstraction, the complete opening up to the concept of "anything goes" only entered the world of art in postmodern times.

This new alliance of the artist and the audience also led to a greater engagement with social issues: Art became an outlet for radical feminist artists, like Carole Schneemann (in her famous 1975 performance "Interior Scroll," her own nude body becomes an active part in the work of art), or Judy Chicago. "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), her most well-known work, is a "symbolic history of women in Western Civilization," as she herself describes it. It is a three-sided table with thirty-nine-place setting, each of which is dedicated to another woman. Each plate has a different vagina/butterfly design, and on the ground, an additional 999 names of other women are inscribed in gold (Pohl 526-27). But artists also "renewed interest in the outside world" and used their art as an act of political and social protest, described by Hoffmann and Hornung as "emancipatory postmodernism" (v), as artists used their art to engage in the Civil Rights Movement, or as a means of protesting against the Vietnam War (Pohl 512).

The museum as a place that defines art also grew into a major institution with an immense influence of the curators on the market (Ursprung 14).²⁷ As happenings and performances did not fit into the world of museums, Andy Warhol, whose art is the epitome of Pop Art, selected mass culture and mass consumption as a central theme, and integrated it into the production of his work. Fittingly, his studio became known as a “factory” which fully embraced the concept of mass production. Warhol delivered the material to be exhibited to satisfy the need of the art world (Ursprung 23).

As postmodernism is not a strict countermovement to modernism, but a playful continuation and modification, it still carries features of modernism, such as abstraction. However, techniques and media are expanded, as well as its now prominent place in society, the new interaction with the audience and the rise of the art market in general. A juxtaposition of the two stances on art – Bill Watterson’s self-conception based on the modern artists, and Calvin’s notion based on postmodern artists – reveals Watterson’s respect for the characteristics as featured in the modern art movement, but also his criticism of the deformation of these achievements throughout the twentieth century embodied in Calvin and his art.

The first part of the following chapter reveals how Watterson’s self-conception as an artist in terms of craft, authorship, and creativity is shaped by the modern artists of the early twentieth century. An analysis of Calvin’s engagement in the art world then unearths his self-conception as a postmodern artist and how this impacts his art.

In “Some Thoughts on the Real World by One Who Glimpsed It and Fled,” Watterson summarizes what he considers to be the most important ingredients for good and authentic art. He comments on his self-understanding as an artist as follows:

It [the licensing of his comic strips] would have meant my purpose in writing was to sell things, not to say things. My pride in craft would be sacrificed to the efficiency of mass production and the work of assistants. Authorship would become committee decision. Creativity would become work for pay. Art would turn into commerce (“Some Thoughts”).

²⁷ Kaprow even compares the museum to churches: “. . . the Mona Lisa is enshrined in the Louvre” (56).

According to Watterson, the three major components of good art are craft, authorship, and creativity. These three also play a role for modern artist.

5.3.2 “A mental playfulness”: Watterson’s Understanding of Craft, Authorship, Creativity

Bill Watterson considers good craft, authorship and creativity essential components of good art and his self-conception as an artist. Although his art looks entirely different, his understanding of all three components is deeply shaped by the self-conception of the modern artists.

As modern art was the first art movement to leave aside representational art and move into abstraction, it is mostly associated with a lack of skill. Thus, the artists encountered disaccord from the public which led to arguments between the artists and critics. During the Third Reich, modern art was stigmatized as “*entartete Kunst*.” Paul Klee, for instance, was told that his paintings could have been done by a seven-year old (Gay 34). Modern artists defended themselves against these accusations. Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, for example, wrote an ironic essay, “*Was Kunst ist; eine Regel für große Kritiker*,” in which he objects to the idea that “the kind of art that imitates nature best has a higher position in the hierarchy of art forms” [Beekman 254]). The modern artists thought, “any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery is of little worth. The very name Troubadour means a ‘finder,’ one who discovers” (Howey 137). In that respect, the motivation for modern artists to move into abstraction was not the inability to produce high quality art, but the desire to create something new and to discover new ways. On the contrary, most of them were skilled artists. Egon Schiele’s early works, for instance, reveal his artistic skill – his move into abstraction was a deliberate step (Vartanian 10).²⁸ For modern artists, craft served as a prerequisite to convey truth; only those artists who mastered the craft could then move into abstraction. In the same way, Watterson values craft, not as a means in itself, but as a vehicle to transport truth:

²⁸ Vartanian’s work *Egon Schiele: Aquarelle und Zeichnungen* shows Schiele’s early works in which he proves to have a highly skilled and talented brushstroke.

To attract and keep an audience, art must entertain, but the significance of any art lies in its ability to express truths – to reveal and help us understand our world. Comic strips, in their own humble way, are capable of doing this. . . . Surprise is the essence of humor, and nothing is more surprising than truth. (*Tenth* 207)

In the context of the eighties, this is an unusual statement for a newspaper comic artist. But Watterson wanted to use his art skilfully instead of manipulating the audience with cheap techniques: “There’s a cheap way to manipulate people with comic strips by drawing in a very sentimental manner – big, sensitive eyes, stuff like that – but I try not to do that” (Tucker). Watterson laments that the negligence of true craft creates flat and stereotypical characters who only serve as “props to relate a gag” (Interview Christie 32). For Watterson, a disregard for comics as a means to convey truth which requires the mastering of the craft results in the cheapening of the comics, i.e., commercialization. It means to take individual images out of their context in which they convey truth and put them on commercial items. That did not make Watterson particularly popular among his colleagues. “My point is simply,” Watterson defends himself in “The Cheapening of Comics,” “that cartoons are not necessarily doomed to increasing stupidity and crude craftsmanship” (98). He insists that good craftsmanship is a prerequisite to convey truth and produce good art.

The second component essential for Watterson is authorship over his artwork. Although it seems natural, it was neither a matter of course for the modern artist nor for Watterson. As artists prior to the twentieth century considered themselves to be service-providers, art became a commodity. The question then of the true nature of art is reflected in Henry James’s short story “The Real Thing,” written in 1892: The Monarchs, an aristocratic couple, want to pose for a portrait. As the artist begins the painting, he eventually decides to work with two lower-class models instead who seem to be more authentic than the representatives of nineteenth-century aristocracy. Modern artists also wanted to free themselves from nineteenth-century art that seemed inauthentic to them. Portraiture, which was the main income for artists at that time, encountered great competition from photography, through which ‘reality’ could be reproduced in an instant and which had a long-term effect on the

relation between art and reality.²⁹ The modern artists became discontent with the mental narrow-mindedness and the substitutability of the art of the older generation and began to focus more on authorship, the unexpectedness and rawness of daily life, individuality and subjectivity expressed through art (Berghahn 223).

Watterson turns away from the concept of the artist as a service provider. His main argument with the syndicate was about selling off the rights of the comic strip: "So long as it [his art] has my name on it, I want it to be mine. I don't know, if you don't have that kind of investment in it. . . I guess that's the difference between looking at it as an art and looking at it as a job. I'm not interested in setting up an assembly line to produce this thing more efficiently" (Interview Christie 33). Therefore, Watterson became protective of his artwork and did not allow any ghost writers to continue his comics.³⁰

The third value Watterson says is essential for successful art is creativity. For the modern artists, creativity meant possessing an intrinsic desire to create: "For them [Die Brücke], Van Gogh was the clearest example of an artist driven by an 'inner force' and 'inner necessity,' his paintings presented an ecstatic identification of empathy of the artist with the subject he was interpreting" (Arnasson 122). Modern art is a mirror of the artist's soul. That idea impacted the motifs of the artists (such as the overwhelming power and the personifications of cities in paintings of Ludwig Meidner), the color palette, and even the perspective (such as the Cubistic fracture of perspective). The maxim to work from the inside out can also be found in Watterson's notion of creativity. He wants his art to be "immediate and honest" (Interview West 70-71), that is, driven by the desire to work from the inside out:

²⁹ Photography was used for the first time in 1839, but it took a long time until it was broadly used in society. However, gradually it even developed into an art form itself. In 1940, the Museum of Modern Art in New York installed a photo department. The invention of photography had a tremendous impact on the relation between painting and reality (cf. Halwani 184, Fisch 323).

³⁰ In the eighties, this phenomenon was already under attack by individual artists, such as Will Eisner: "... one must immediately acknowledge," he says, "that in a perfect (or pure) configuration the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person" (Eisner 127). However, this had not fully reached the genre of newspaper comic strips.

If I've learned one thing from being a cartoonist, it's how important playing is to creativity and happiness. My job is essentially to come up with 365 ideas a year. If you ever want to find out just how uninteresting you really are, get a job where the quality and frequency of your thoughts determine your livelihood. I've found that the only way I can keep writing every day, year after year, is to let my mind wander into new territories. To do that, I've had to cultivate a kind of mental playfulness. ("Some Thoughts")

Therefore Watterson cultivated his own "mental playfulness," and when Michael Jantze, a cartoonist, asked Watterson for his opinion on his cartoons, Watterson replied:

The characters don't appear to be acting out of any inner necessity. Events seem opposed on them, instead of developing though them. Put another way, I think the characters need to stop performing and start living... I think these characters need more personality, more reason to exist. Worry about that, and the jokes come by themselves. (Martell 181)

That creative process and the mental playfulness enabled Watterson to see "life through new eyes." Creativity cannot be motivated through outer factors such as deadlines, success, or money ("Cheapening" 94).

These three aspects of art – craft, authorship, and creativity – shaped Watterson's notion of comic strips as an art form. Like the modern artists who were searching for a new self-definition after the disenchantment of the Great War, Watterson was concerned with a quest for identity and self-discovery as a newspaper comic artist in a world driven by commerce. This overall issue of self-conception as an artist is picked up by Calvin in the comics. He raises the same questions as Watterson, but instead of taking the modern artists as an example, Calvin answers the questions with the attitude and the worldview of a postmodern artist, giving his art an entirely different spin.

5.3.3 "I don't think you have enough to do": Calvin and the Post-modern Art World

Like Watterson, Calvin becomes active as an artist and creatively copes with his surroundings. However, he does not only create art, but by

musings on the artistic process he enables the reader to gain an insight into Calvin's creative process as a contemporary artist. However, his art proves to be a parody of the postmodern artists as he is not exceptionally gifted with artistic skills. Calvin disguises that lack by infiltrating his art with empty postmodern buzzwords and rhetoric.

Calvin considers himself to be a "suburban post-modernist," although his first choice was to be a "neo-deconstructivist" which his mother would not allow (*Magical* 67). His art is postmodern art performed in a suburban context. He picks up the ideas and terminology of contemporary art, but as he drags these lofty concepts into his little suburban world, he reveals and ridicules the cant and empty rhetoric of the art world.

The new role of the audience in postmodern art impacts Calvin's art. Calvin does not devote his artistic power to painting, as most of the modern artists did, but he branches out into other media. He does sidewalk chalk drawings, pottery, and occasionally tries writing, but he mainly focuses on "snow art" – sculptures made of snow. As usual, Calvin is accompanied by Hobbes, who critically questions and comments on his art. Interestingly, in most cases, the artistic process takes place outside, and so – in theory – it is accessible to a broad audience. Paradoxically, Calvin's art never enjoys a large audience: In his little suburban world, nobody seems to care about his art other than his uncomprehending parents who are shocked by their son's creations: "On the other hand, the neighbors keep planting nice big trees next to us" (*Treasure* 87); "You have to admit it's slowed down the traffic on our road" (*Killer* 92); "I don't think you have enough to do" (*Packed* 34); "I don't think the schools assign enough homework" (*Treasure* 81). Calvin ascribes to his material – snow – a special function: The "monochromatic" material stands for life's ephemerality (*Indis* 201-02). For Calvin, it is a reflection of life's impermanence, thus corresponding with his fugacious philosophy and the short-sighted answers he gives to make sense of the world.

Dorothy L. Sayers's dictum "A work of creation is a work of love" (104) certainly does not apply to Calvin. He reveals his motivation to create art when he asks himself, "Why does man create? Is it man's purpose on earth to express himself, to bring form to thought, and to discover meaning in experience?" In the third panel, Calvin leans against his snowman and reflects on that question for a moment. Then

he takes up his work again, and ironically comments, “Or is it just something to do when he’s bored?” (*Treasure* 131).³¹

Calvin’s questioning of the artist’s motivation collides with his sulky answer. He seems rather dispassionate about his art as he does not concede the artistic motivation to have any right to exist other than as a half-hearted pastime. Yet this rather ironic twist at the end of the comic strip captures the mood of contemporary artists, who often display a similar moodiness. Robert Cumming describes the mood of contemporary artists as one in which “[d]etachment and irony are widely praised as virtues; lip service is paid to personal manual skill but the slipshod is commonly applauded as spontaneity” (371). In the same manner, Calvin’s detachment from the artistic process is a reflection of the attitude of the contemporary artists. He does not possess the same intrinsic motivation or higher aspiration to create as the modern artists or Bill Watterson, whose motivation for creating his art was to express his thoughts about life. Although Calvin also expresses his thoughts about the world, his motivation is a parody of the postmodern artists as his prime motivation is either a lack of pleasant alternatives to waste his time as expressed in the comic strip above – or, on a second layer, monetary profit (as his notion of authorship reveals). With that conception, Calvin creates art and muses on his creative process, and picks up the same notions that Bill Watterson discusses: creativity, craft, and authorship.

“Mom and Dad don’t value hard work as much as they say they do”:
Calvin’s Notion of Creativity

Watterson’s understanding of creativity is to develop one’s own “mental playfulness” and to “see life through new eyes.” Calvin, however, emphasizes originality rather than creativity: Calvin’s self-conception as a suburban postmodern artist is revealed in one comic after he has just completed some scary snow sculptures. While he and Hobbes

³¹ At times, he also creates to execute power by destroying, for example, his castle in the sand again. This however falls into the category of self-conception rather than art and is thus discussed at length in the chapter on philosophy.

contemplate the ghastly sculptures, Calvin remarks: "Mom and Dad don't value hard work and originality as much as they say they do" (*Treasure* 101). Although the terms "creativity" and "originality" are closely related (anyone who creates does something original), creativity carries the connotation of creating something meaningful. Originality, on the other hand, rather focuses on inventiveness.³²

The rise of relativism and new pluralism in art encouraged artists to experiment with new media like film/video, sound, electronic media, or graffiti (Nam June Paik, for instance, was the first to create video art; or Andy Warhol exhibited articles of daily use, such as the famous Brillo boxes). This notion of art is described by Ihab Hassan as "playful, paratactical, and deconstructionist" (91). The sense of a playful use of any medium and of deconstruction attached to postmodernism (first famously promoted by Jacques Derrida) paved the path for anything in contemporary art to happen (Butler 17). Rules did not seem to be attached to art any longer, and this new freedom from any formal constraints created a sense of 'anything goes.' Art continued to move away from any kind of aestheticism: "Art which supposedly pushes the boundaries of what art is, is very much 'in.' Shock, gritty realism, almost any sort of confrontation, and artworks that play with concepts and words are exhibited more frequently than those concerned with looking and seeing, or aesthetic experience" (Cumming 371). In that respect, contemporary art emphasizes originality rather than inventiveness and creativity. Instead, the artists stage-manage their artistic process and their own function, as Andy Warhol insisted: "I want to be a machine" (Interview). Calvin forges the same path by focusing on hard work and originality. That does not imply that Calvin's artworks are not creative – at times, his works display surprising and new ideas, and he also conveys his view on the world. Overall Calvin does not seem to care too much about meaningful art, but his notion of creativity is related to the self-staging of his supposed genius. As Calvin deems himself a genius, which, of course, is based on no other evidence than his own claim, he is convinced that anything he does is ingenious. His own persona as a

³² As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: "As an attribute of persons: original thought or action; independent exercise of one's creative faculties; the power of originating new or fresh ideas or methods; inventiveness" ("originality").

genius is the most important legitimization for the creative power he claims to have.

As a child of the “Me Generation,” Calvin regards himself as the center of the world and a misunderstood genius (*Treasure* 9), and being a genius is what makes his art original. Calvin does not become tired of emphasizing that he is a genius (*Drooling* 117),³³ or a “child prodigy” (*Treasure* 154). He is “destined for greatness, I just know it. ‘Calvin the Great,’ they’ll call me” (*Indis* 99). He argues, “Any dumb kid can build a snowman, but it takes a genius like me to create *art*” (*Indis* 201), and he insists on “Call me Calvin. Actually, make that, ‘Calvin, boy genius, hope of mankind’... or ‘Doctor Destiny’ for short. (that’s ‘Doctor Destiny, Sir’ to you)” (*Packed* 136). Moreover, he feels obligated to keep a journal on his thoughts because as “a genius, [his] ideas are naturally more important and interesting than other people’s, so [he] figure[s] the world would benefit from a record of [his] mental activities” (*Packed* 131). Calvin’s consideration of himself as a genius and child prodigy allows him to comment on the world from the perspective of an outsider and freethinker, and elevates anything he does to art. Because he creates artworks the world has never seen, he considers himself avant-garde. However, as his art proves to be meaningless, he reveals how little a genius he actually is.

In that respect, Calvin becomes the embodiment of the self-staging of postmodern artists. Whereas some artists of modernism also nurtured their image as autodidactic child prodigies (Beyme 46) and presented themselves as outsiders of society, as “berufliche Außenseiter,” who were mocked by society as “bemühte Amateure” (Gay 32), Calvin rather seems to suffer from an excessive overestimation of his own position. The self-staging of the artists began with extensive media coverage of Andy Warhol and the abundance of interviews he gave. However, as Calvin is only a six-year old who constantly proves not to be a genius, but rather has a narcissist self-confidence, his entire self-staging turns into a parody of the self-conception of postmodern artists. In most cases it is Hobbes who points toward the discrepancy between his self-assessment and reality. When Calvin announces that he wants to be a teenage star, Hobbes comments, “Then you should probably blow your

³³ He practices his signature “Calvin,” but then changes it into “Calvin the genius” only to add “Calvin the super genius.”

nose more regularly" (*Treasure* 9). In another strip, Calvin explains to Hobbes that "all papers and magazines will probably want to interview you to find out what I'm really like." Smilingly, Hobbes says: "And boy, will you have to cough up to keep me quiet" (*Indis* 99). Hobbes crushes Calvin's misty-eyed dreams by contrasting them to the realities of his life as a six-year old. At times it is also Calvin himself who proves that he is not as ingenious as he thinks. For example, when he cannot come up with a diary entry, he decides to draw some Martians attacking Indianapolis instead (*Packed* 131). He realizes that he has little to say, but instead of reflecting on his art and lack of creativity, he stubbornly sticks to his conviction of being a genius and fills the void with meaninglessness he calls art.

Unlike Warhol's successful reception as an artistic genius by the public, Calvin's self-staging as a genius and his art is not well-received by his surrounding: He is the only one who believes in his genius. As Calvin cannot cope with criticism, he reads the rejection as an affirmation of his genius: When a neighbor child laughs about his art, which speaks "to the horror of our own mortality!" Hobbes ironically comments, "A Philistine on the sidewalk!" and Calvin mourns, "Genius is never understood in its own time" (*Indis* 201).³⁴

Calvin's notion of creativity is based on his supposed status as a genius and his exhibition of the same rather than the inner necessity to create "immediate and honest" art as Watterson wanted to do ("Some Thoughts"). For Calvin, art is the arena where to stage himself.

"My 6-year-old kid could do that!": Calvin's Notion of Craft

Calvin's concept of craft is closely tied to his self-perception. He thinks that as a genius, he does not have to be bothered with acquiring skills

³⁴ Calvin's reaction is also a hidden reference to the Bible, and refers to a verse in Mark 6:4, "A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." Calvin sees himself in line with the Biblical prophets who announced the coming judgment over the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Calvin legitimizes his position by arguing that since the beginning of mankind, the truth-speakers have been rejected by the masses.

and mastering the craft, as anything he does automatically turns into gold.

Whereas modern artists still had to defend themselves for their apparent lack of skill, postmodern artists have come to terms with that issue. Skill is not a significant standard to be applied to a work of art anymore, and yet, the debate is not fully dead: John Cage's musical pieces such as "4 33" that only features silence and Joseph Beuys' installations stirred and still stir the debate about the relation between quality and art. Artworks such as Jeff Koons's *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Two Dr J Silver Series, Spalding NBA Tip-Off)* (1985), in which he exhibits three basketballs in a tank full of distilled water, bear nothing of the high-skilled works of Jan van Eyck, so that even artist and art theorist Robert Florczak wonders in his video "Why Is Modern Art so Bad?" how modern art can lack so much skill ("Why Is Modern Art"). Paul Feyerabend's 1975 'anything goes' principle (19), which was taken by many as a free-for-all postmodernism, has been misunderstood as anything was to be taken as art as soon as it was declared to be art by the artist, the masses, or a curator. Therefore, museums take over that pivotal role by making works of art not only accessible to the broad audience, but also by institutionalizing them:

[Carl Andre's rectangular pile of bricks, *Equivalent VIII* (1966) at the Tate Gallery, London] might inspire the question 'Is it really art, or just a heap of bricks pretending to be art?' But this is not a question that makes much sense in the postmodernist era in which it seems to be generally accepted that it is the institution of the gallery, rather than anything else, which had made it, de facto, a 'work of art'. The visual arts just are what museum curators show us, from Picasso to sliced-up cows, and it is up to us to keep up with the ideas surrounding these works. (Butler 1)

So the question is no longer whether a work of art meets a certain quality standard in terms of skill; the point is the audience's emotional investment in the audience with the artwork.³⁵

³⁵ This loss of quality standards has meanwhile also produced a counter-movement, for example, the founding of the Art Renewal Center that focuses on the promotion of education in realistic painting ("About Us").

Of course, for Calvin, the lack of required artistic skill is a welcoming entry into the art world for him, as it does not only ease his access into the world of artists but is also beneficial for him: "You know how people look at modern art and always say, 'My 6-year-old kid could do that!?' Well, that gave me this great idea! I've decided to become a forger and get rich passing off fake paintings to museums!" (*Indis* 243). For Calvin, being six years old appears to be the only requirement to qualify as an artist, and so this time he plans to get rich as an art forger. Whereas modern artists would have adhered to their ascetic (though highly staged) life, Calvin as a postmodern artist ruthlessly embraces fame and fortune. On two occasions, Calvin even admits his lack of artistic skill, namely when he wants to create a figural object out of clay. He ends up doing an ashtray although his parents do not smoke, because an ashtray is the easiest thing to do (*Drooling* 59). The second time he creates a figure out of clay, it "started out as a phantom jet, but it sort of squashed, so now I think it's a bowl" (*Drooling* 79). Whenever he wants to create figural sculptures, he sees himself confronted with the limitations of his own skill. However, as artistic skill is no longer a required standard, Calvin does not show any ambition to acquire any. This becomes clear when his artistic streak and lethargy meet. He explains to Hobbes the risks that come along with creating art, and overworking is listed as the prime danger. He decides that creating art is too much work: "If it's good, what's the point? It's just going to melt in a few weeks anyway! It's all futile! So instead of wasting my time, I'm going inside, pull down the shades and watch TV" (*Treasure* 132). Calvin opts for passive entertainment provided by mass media, and Hobbes sarcastically asks, "Are you sure it's not too much trouble to turn on the TV?" Calvin replies "That's why we have a remote control."

Calvin's behavior is absurd: his laziness and lack of ambition prevents him from reaching a higher level of skill. Therefore he never improves the low quality of his art and has to compensate the lack of skill with bombastic titles and diffuse interpretations of his art. Only in one comic does Calvin unexpectedly call for craftsmanship: "We don't value craftsmanship anymore! All we value is ruthless efficiency, and I say we deny our own humanity that way! . . . How can a person take pride in his work when skill and care are considered luxuries! We're machines! We have a human need for craftsmanship!" (*Treasure* 173). The reason for his ardent speech, however, is again motivated by his laziness. Calvin

has not done his homework and tries to justify his delinquency with a cry for craftsmanship. Calvin adapts the rhetoric of the postmodern artists, but by being a snotty and lazy six-year old, he ridicules and parodies the loss of quality and a lack of standards in postmodern art.

“People want MORE of what they KNOW they like, so popular art gives it to ‘em.”: Calvin’s Notion of Authorship

In terms of authorship, Watterson’s and Calvin’s opinions diverge tremendously. Calvin confronts the reader with the challenge of artists and their attitude toward commercialism by asking,

The hard part for us avant-garde post-modern artists is deciding whether or not to embrace commercialism. Do we allow our work to be hyped and exploited by a market that’s simply hungry for the next new thing? Do we participate in a system that turns high art into low art so it’s better suited for mass consumption? Of course, when an artist goes commercial, he makes a mockery of his status as an outsider and free thinker. He buys into the crass and shallow values art should transcend. He trades the integrity of his art for riches and fame. (*Killer* 59)

This is the same question Bill Watterson is concerned with. However, whereas he decided to keep full authorship over his artwork, Calvin as a postmodern artist quickly jumps to a different conclusion: “Oh, what the heck. I’ll do it.” Hobbes rolls his eyes and comments, “That wasn’t so hard.”

The diverging opinions reveal a characteristic of contemporary art: As contemporary artists celebrated their new alliance with the audience, the audience also turned into the consumer of art; as the art market grew, so did the value of the artworks. They are now “expensive trophy assets, produced by a limited circle of international artists with an easily recognizable ‘brand’ who have themselves become rich celebrities . . .” (Cumming 372). Andy Warhol, who brought commercialization and self-staging to perfection and knew how to transform art into monetary profit, thus made his whole artistic process focused on output:

Some people, they paint abstract, so they sit there thinking about it because their thinking makes them feel they’re doing something. But my thinking never makes me feel I’m doing anything. Leonardo da Vinci

used to convince his patrons that his thinking time was worth something – worth even more than his painting time – and that may have been true for him, but I know that my thinking time isn't worth anything. I only expect to get paid for my “doing” time. (*Philosophy* 149)

Similarly, Calvin regards his art as a commodity, as a means to make money. When Calvin and Hobbes mould something out of clay, Hobbes does a tiger, whereas Calvin creates “a hundred shrunken heads of popular cartoon characters” – “collectible figurines,” as he calls them (*Packed* 99-100). He deliberately wants to create popular art as it is supposed to sell better: “. . . popular art knows the customer is always right! People want MORE of what they already KNOW they like, so popular art gives it to ‘em” (*Packed* 99). Ironically, Calvin cannot find a buyer, and his mother is disgusted by his work.

Thus, just like contemporary artists, Calvin poses new questions concerning marketability. Although artists have always used their art to survive, now the idea of commerce for commerce's sake enters the art world and is, of course, embraced and ridiculed by Calvin. His understanding of art totally embraces the commercial aspect, and he even includes it in the artistic process. However, again through the suburban setting, Calvin's ostentatious merchandizing plans appear ridiculous. His mother is disgusted by Calvin's “collectible figurines;” she prefers to put Hobbes's tiger (entitled “Symphony in Orange, No. 1”) on the table. Calvin cannot find any consumers of his art – his mother not even wants to give him a grant (*Packed* 28) – and so his entire concept fails. The audience, the driving force behind contemporary artists, is missing. Without an audience, without the approval of the masses, Calvin's popular art merely remains a piece of poorly crafted clay.

“. . . my work is utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance”: The Content of Calvin's Art

Calvin adapts features of contemporary art not only in the staging of himself as an artist, but also in the content of his art, and places them in his narrow suburban context. He is concerned with similar topics (a playful treatment of the fugitiveness of life, despair, parodying the modern artists, etc.), but he also adapts styles (abstract art) and habits

(inventing his own movement and composing his own artist's statement). As he translates these into a new context, he ridicules them by revealing their meaninglessness.

Themes

There is a broad range of topics – at times contradictory – in contemporary art, which makes the movement difficult to grasp. Theo D'haen describes postmodernism as double-coded:

On the one hand, by using subject material and techniques from the popular level of the culture it forms part of, postmodern artefacts and texts have a direct appeal as a consumer article to all, even the least artistically or literarily trained, contemporary Americans. On the other hand, by its parodistic use of earlier – and predominantly Modernist – works of art and literature, and by its ironizing of its popular material and techniques, it also appeals to the artistically and literarily sophisticated (226).

In this respect, Calvin's art is consumer-oriented. His parodies mostly bear some self-referentiality or some overstatement, as it became a habit for contemporary artists, described by Robert Cumming:

[T]oday's most exhibited art is often large-scale with an emphasis on headline-grabbing social issues or personal revelations about an artist's life... Celebrity status, producing something which will draw in the crowds, and above all, making money are promoted as desirable goals, modesty, self-doubt, the quiet commentary on the dignity or absurdity of humanity, or the wish to create a better world for mankind, do not offer a promising route to fame and fortune. (371)

In line with his postmodern "colleagues", Calvin offers magniloquent and full-bodied interpretations of social issues or his personal life. His art can totally keep up with the art of his contemporaries: Calvin addresses the absurdity of existence, the meaning of life, death, suicide, transience, horrors of life, the value of form, content, and style, and he questions the concept of art completely. However, as he mostly uses weird and perishable snow sculptures that quickly melt away, his entire art has a parodistic quality to it.

On the other hand, his art also contains explicit humorous parodies on the modern artists. An immediate parody of modern artists can be

found in Calvin's snow sculpture entitled "Nude Descending a Staircase." Calvin explains that as an artist he will "speak to future generations long after I'm gone" (*Treasure* 141), so he presents his latest snow sculpture to Hobbes, a snowman about to walk down a staircase made out of snow.

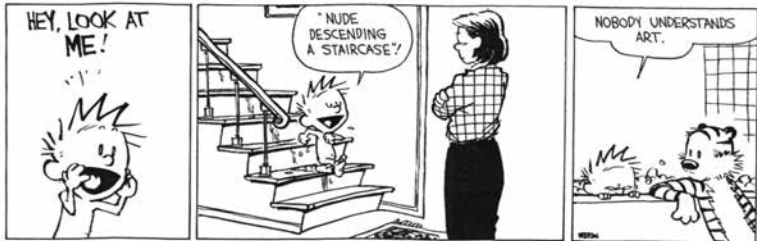


The title refers to Marcel Duchamp's painting "Nude Descending a Staircase," which was first exhibited in the Armory Show in New York 1913 – the first American exhibition to feature European Modern Art (A. Schwarz, *Duchamp* 317-19).³⁶ By using Duchamp's artwork as a model, Calvin adds a transnational component to his creation. Duchamp's intention was to break up movement and the natural portrayal of man by representing man not as one coherent person but as a fractured and nude existence. It is a reflection on the dissolving humanity in the arts and the abstraction of man. However, by placing Duchamp's art into a new context, Calvin's sculpture turns into a parody; the sculpture will melt away, it will not survive to speak to "future generations." Calvin ignores the drawing style and technique and merely focuses on the act of the nude descending; the sculpture thus loses its original explosiveness and turns into a humorous but pointless parody of Duchamp.

Calvin even refers to this very artwork a second time, when he leaves his bathtub and descends the staircase himself (*Treasure* 41). Here Calvin becomes a part of the artwork, and again, he places the emphasis on the act of walking rather than on the fragmentation of man. Just as Duchamp's artwork was rejected by the masses, so is Calvin's.

³⁶ There are three paintings by Duchamp entitled "Nude Descending a Staircase," numbered serially from one to three. They all look very similar. However, since No. 2 was exhibited in New York in 1913, it is the most popular one.

His mother rejects it because he gets the house wet instead of taking his bath. Duchamp's protest against a representational illustration of man is parodied by Calvin's protest against his parents' rule to stay in the bathtub while bathing. Both are a revolt against given social norms, only that Calvin's revolt is a humoristic parody on the original thought.



Another of Calvin's artworks is entitled "The Torment of Existence Weighed against the Horror of Nonbeing" (*Treasure* 63). The title bears resemblance to Damien Hirst's famous exhibition of the shark in a tank, which carries the bulky title "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" (1991), the icon of contemporary art and one of the most expensive works. In 2008, the shark was sold to Steven A. Cohen for \$ 8 million – the highest price for a contemporary artwork at that time (Vogel). However, Calvin's snow sculpture itself bears more resemblance to Edvard Munch's "The Scream": It is made out of snow, and like in Munch's scream, the figure holds its arms at its head in agony. Calvin explains the merit of the medium: "As he melts, the sculpture will become even more poignant."



Calvin's depiction of horror, however, turns into a parody of Munch, as it is only white and entirely omits the high-contrast colors of Munch. Furthermore, his sculpture resembles a weird cartoony character and bears the exaggerated drama of Roy Lichtenstein's comic style. So in a

good postmodern manner, Calvin parodies the modern artists. However, by placing their originally explosive content into his small world and offering ludicrous interpretations, he ridicules postmodern artists as well.

Style

Concerning his style, Calvin also moves into abstraction. In doing so, Calvin copies the artistic style of the modern artists which is often also an element in postmodern art.

The most prominent artist of early abstract painting is Wassily Kandinsky, but Paul Klee's colorful cubes are also well known. Klee, who experienced the Great War as a soldier, sets abstraction in relation to the horrors of the world: "Je schreckensvoller diese Welt (wie gerade heute), desto abstrakter die Kunst, während eine glückliche Welt eine diesseitige Kunst hervorbringt" (qtd. in Dittmann 325). This drawing style, however, was continued and playfully refined by American artists such as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, or Adolph Gottlieb from the fifties onward (Glaves-Smith and Chilvers, "Abstract Expressionism"). The most prominent artist of abstractionism in the fifties is Jackson Pollock with his action painting – he introduced the process of dripping the paint on the canvas. Pollock was not in physical contact with the canvas, but showed high physical activity in creating his artworks.

Calvin also moves into abstraction when he creates the abstract snow sculpture. He argues: "This piece is about the inadequacy of traditional imagery and symbols to convey meaning into today's world. By abandoning representationalism, I'm free to express myself with pure form. Specific interpretation gives way to a more visceral response" (*Indis* 202).

For him, it is less a matter of horror rather than a means for him of lending his weird thoughts an adequate form, a weird vehicle that corresponds to his weird meaning. Calvin's thoughts rather prove to be a mangle-mangle of random ideas; his move into abstraction is a way to find an adequate carrier. As his art repeatedly proves to be insubstantial, his use of abstract art turns into a parody and mockery of abstract art – his guideless form reflects his lack of meaning.

Habits

Calvin also parodies the habit of artists in the twentieth century of inventing new art movements. The avant-garde artists were famous for their almost inflationary invention of new “-isms,” such as Futurism, Expressionism, Pointillism, Dadaism, Cubism, etc., and that continued in the second half of the twentieth century with Conceptualism, Post-minimalism, Photorealism, and Abstract Illusionism, just to name a few. For modern artists, the founding of art movements was an essential step in their self-conception:

Die Proklamation eines “Ismus” ist ein stets demonstrativer Akt, der die Bedeutung dieses und nur dieses Ismus hervorstreicht, und häufig ist er ein performativer Akt, der die Proklamation selbst zur avantgardistisch-künstlerischen Praxis erhebt und Verkündigung und Vollzug, Theorie und Praxis vereinigt. (Berg 2)

Of course, Calvin follows the same path, and he argues, “the most crucial career decision is picking a good ‘ism’ so everyone knows how to categorize you without understanding the work.” So, Calvin decides to be a “suburban post-modernist” as he does “goofy drawings on the sidewalk” – although he prefers being a “neo-deconstructivist” – but his mother did not let him (*Magical* 67). Being categorizable legitimizes Calvin to do art that is not intelligible; belonging to an art movement makes him – in his opinion – a respectable artist. Calvin’s invented art movement “Neo-deconstructivism” is a compound: Deconstructivism, a movement of the 1980s that mainly affected architecture, is now supplemented by Calvin with “neo-,” the creation of a new art movement that Calvin carelessly applies to his chalk drawings. In a different comic strip, Calvin also invents “neo-regionalism” to describe a snow sculpture (*Packed* 29).³⁷ The picking of -isms reveals that Calvin does not feel obliged to create art that is understood by the audience. He explains to Hobbes that “art is a private language for sophisticates to congratulate themselves on their superiority to the rest of the world” (*Magical* 68). For Calvin, the invention of -isms is a legitimization of anything he does as art.

³⁷ He explains that it should be “appealing to popular nostalgia for the simple values of rural America 50 years ago.”

However, this formal self-staging by Calvin also has an additional function: the composing of his artist's statement. For the modern artists, the invention of an -ism was accompanied by the publication of a manifesto which elaborated on the art movement and restated the self-conception of a group of artists. This habit was common in the early twentieth century as artists with similar ideologies grouped together and proclaimed their common ideas, their ideological foundation, and their self-conception through manifestos (Beyme 223). In the second half of the twentieth century, manifestos became less popular as the self-stylization of the artists turned into a part of the artistic object. Artists began to self-stage themselves as artists, and individual artist statements became more popular, which is still common today for artists to publish their own statement on their website. An abundance of websites offering their assistance in composing a convincing artist statement indicates their demand. The composing of artist's statements even turned into an art in itself: In 2005, Maria Paschalidou and Georgia Kotretsos curated an exhibition on artist statements in the Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center in Chicago, entitled "The Art of the Artist Statement" ("Curatorial Activities").

So, of course, Calvin supports the invention of his art movement by composing his own artist's statement, because "art is a private language for sophisticates to congratulate themselves on their superiority to the rest of the world." His "artist's statement explains, [his] work is utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance" (*Magical* 68). As Hobbes reads through the manifesto, he remarks, "You misspelled 'Weltanschauung.'" The reader does not learn any details about the paper other than that it consists of a multitude of avant-garde buzzwords that are pieced together to explain Calvin's unfathomable art. For Calvin, the choice of a good -ism and his artist's statement is necessary to legitimize his art. Again, he parodies both modern and contemporary art by caring more about legitimizing his art to the outside world than creating well-crafted and thought-out art.

At the peak of Calvin's parody on the rhetoric of postmodern art, Calvin presents his latest snow sculpture (*Cat* 44). The Sunday comic strip is kept in cold purple and bright blue colors for the panel frames and the speech balloons, but otherwise plays with negative and white space to reflect Calvin's latest snow sculpture as he stands in an empty snowscape. As Hobbes scratches his head and wonders where it is,

Calvin rejoices, "All of this!" and he explains: "Art is dead! There's nothing left to say. Style is exhausted and content is pointless. Art has no purpose. All that's left is commodity marketing." So Calvin kneels down in the snow to sign the landscape to sell it to Hobbes for a million dollars. Hobbes's reaction is as original as it is a down-to-earth reply to Calvin's shallow rhetoric: "Sorry ... it doesn't match my furniture." As Hobbes leaves, Calvin sighs, "The problem with being avant-garde is knowing who's putting on who."

The comic strip points to the ultimate exhaustion of contemporary art. While artists try to outplay one another, to push the limits of art and repeatedly question what art is, while they hope to create bigger and more expensive artworks, find new ways, new styles and new shocking media, Calvin concludes that nothing is left. Calvin lays bare the ultimate meaninglessness of his own art and how all of his art culminates in nothingness (see: p. 247). In his entire self-staging as an artist, Calvin adopts the habits and rhetoric of contemporary artists. Watterson's self-understanding as an artist is rooted in the self-conception of the modern artists of the early twentieth century. Through Calvin, Watterson voices the same questions he himself poses, but because Calvin's self-conception is that of a contemporary artist, he comes to entirely different conclusions than Bill Watterson. Calvin gives his answers in the context of his limited suburban surroundings and his world of snowmen, and thus reveals the absurdity of the contemporary art world. He ridicules not only the content of modern artists, but also their self-understanding and their interaction with society. Calvin adopts the superficial features of contemporary art, but he delivers a nonsensical interpretation in which he mocks the art world's shortcomings.

Interestingly, there is a second and more hidden layer attached to the comic strips. Watterson does not only consider modern fine artists his role models, but also early twentieth-century comic artists. He admires the diligence and the passion of George Herriman and Walt Kelly. In Watterson's eyes, however, both worlds of contemporary art and of cartooning have degenerated. In both cases, there was a soft transition from a generation of fine artists to a generation of artists who lost sight of their artistic inheritance, and merely wanted to outdo one another by attracting more media attention, by finding a larger audience, and by making more money with their art. The more ostentatious, the better.



Through Calvin, Watterson once again humorously points to the loss of a true understanding of art.

5.4 Ecology

5.4.1 Ecology and the Eighties

In the eighties, consumers became aware of the environment as a finite source for human luxury, and the correlation between consumerism and environmental problems became known to the population. As *Calvin and Hobbes* was published at a time in which environmental issues were present in public discourse, the comics pick up the ecology and discuss its implications on Calvin's life, the impact on children, and the impact on the next generation. For Watterson, "Calvin was always a good character for venting my outrage. And I think environmental issues in particular are fundamentally about our children" (Interview Robb 35). In that debate, Hobbes, as he originally is part of nature (although he sometimes displays shockingly little knowledge about his own species), is the nexus, the mediator between man and nature, while at the same time living with Calvin in his suburban home. Calvin's concept of nature is both a positive romanticization and a negative view of an unkempt wilderness. While he observes pollution, he wonders about the responsibility of mankind but refuses to take any action himself. Instead, his happy participation in mass consumption makes him a passive perpetrator in the destruction of nature.

5.4.2 Concept of Nature

"You're lucky you're a tiger": Calvin's Admiration of Nature

Because Hobbes functions as a mediator between nature and civilization, he has a unique function in the comics. Attraction to nature is a common literary theme, and there has been a whole literary movement concerned with man going into nature to live in the wilderness. Nature as a useful place for man can be seen, for example, in British author Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century eponymous hero Robinson Crusoe – the embodiment of a man establishing a life in the wilderness, or in Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* in which Mowgli, the famous feral child, is raised by the wolves (made popular by Disney in the seventies). Interestingly, in the 1967 Disney version, Mowgli stays at the human

camp in the end. In the 2016 new live action/animated adaptation, Mowgli decides to stay with the animals. The perception of man and nature has changed throughout the years and shifted in favor of nature). In American literature, the concept of nature also plays a major role because the Puritans conceptualized the New World as a wilderness that needed to be civilized. In American Romanticism, nature was shifted to the center of the attention: Artists had a highly misty-eyed notion propagated through a deliberate withdrawal back into nature to find the true essence of human existence. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden: A Life in the Woods* have become classics of American literature in which the capital-N Nature is a source of primal beauty, the sublime, and spirituality. The ruthless struggle between man and nature is prominently featured in numerous works by Jack London, and a blend of nature's beauty and harshness can be found in Jon Krakauer's recent *Into the Wild* (1995), which tells the story of Christopher McCandless's tragic adventure trip of leaving civilization to live in the woods, free from social boundaries. This story, however, also reveals the ruthlessness of nature, as McCandless dies in the end from poisonous berries, as it is assumed. Throughout all centuries, epochs and genres, authors and artists have dealt with nature and found different concepts to describe it – as being benevolent, a spiritual source, or even an antagonist. But what all narratives have in common is man leaving his natural habitat to enter nature. *Calvin and Hobbes*, however, carry a new narrative twist: Through Hobbes, the wilderness enters civilization and the two worlds clash on a new level.

As it is not man entering nature but nature entering civilization, Hobbes becomes the immediate bridge to nature. Calvin deems himself secure in the presence of Hobbes, a wild animal, but at the same time he is frequently confronted with the wilderness, e.g. when Hobbes attacks him every time Calvin returns home from school. Hobbes introduces Calvin to the wonders of nature, but at the same time is part of civilization as he also seems to invent facts on the go he tells Calvin about nature. However, as Hobbes is physically superior to Calvin and is not bound by social rules and norms, becoming a tiger is Calvin's ultimate goal. He sighs, "You're lucky you're a tiger" (*Author* 139). Calvin also muses on the phases of human life, "When a kid grows up, he has to BE something. He can't just stay the way he is. But a tiger grows up and stays a tiger. Why is that?" Proud and self-content, Hobbes boasts, "No

room for improvement" (*Packed* 18). Calvin longs for Hobbes's independent life. For Calvin, nature is an exotic place full of wonders and miracles to discover, for instance, when he goes out for an archaeological expedition and digs up what seems to be the bones of a dinosaur. He puts together his discoveries, but it turns out that the "bones" are actually an empty bottle of coke, cutlery, and some empty cans. For Calvin and Hobbes it is a tremendous discovery and a seeming miracle of nature (*Author* 163-66).

Calvin hopes to use any occasion to move into the wilderness and live a life shaped by an absence of social norms. When he is lost in the woods with Hobbes, he rejoices: "We'd better forage for shelter. This will be fun! We can be modern Robinson Crusoes, living off the land by our wits!" and Hobbes adds, "We can be rugged explorers!" "Yeah!" Calvin smiles, "We'll be free from all constraints of civilization! Oh boy!" (*Author* 62). However, their plan fails as they realize that they are just beside their own back yard. The idea of being free from social constraints and merely caring about the immediate moment is tempting to Calvin, especially as he feels bossed around by his teacher and his parents.

There are two incidents when Calvin deliberately wants to emigrate into the nature. In the first incident, he is tired of cleaning up his room and decides to leave home to enjoy a life in freedom: "I don't have to put up with this totalitarianism! I'm seceding! . . . We can live anywhere we want to now that we're seceding from the family! Where do you want to go? The Sahara? Antarctica?" And so he and Hobbes decide to move to the Yukon (*Author* 64-67). Although no further reference is given for why Calvin and Hobbes decide on the Yukon, the reference to the Klondike gold rush in western Canada is at hand. Between 1896 and 1899, thousands of gold diggers were attracted by the discoveries of gold at the Klondike River. But Calvin and Hobbes do not aspire to go to the Yukon to seek wealth and financial independence; their motivation to leave for the Yukon mirrors a modern concept of nature. They are dropouts of modern society and civilization and want to leave aside social constraints and authorities (in the form of his parents), similar to Christopher McCandless's dropout around the same time, or Cheryl Strayed's journey of self-discovery as told in her autobiographical ac-

count, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012).³⁸ The second time Calvin plans to leave civilization, he is in the bathtub and says, "I hate being a kid. Somebody's always telling you to do or what NOT to do. 'Do this!' 'Stop that!' Day after day" (*Author* 139). This time, Calvin does not only want to leave civilization, he wants to leave his human nature entirely aside and become a tiger. So he dresses up as one (he uses red sleepers and draws stripes in his face) and moves into the woods with Hobbes to learn the habits of a tiger from him.

In both incidents, however, Calvin does not come to terms with life in the wilderness. When Calvin and Hobbes set out for the Yukon, their expedition comes to an abrupt end due to a fierce argument of who should be the group leader. Ironically, the societal values and hierarchical structures they want to leave behind are exactly what stops them; they haunt the duo in a way similar to Calvin's realization that he cannot rid himself of his own evil nature.³⁹ When Hobbes wins the argument, Calvin returns home leaving Hobbes alone in the woods. Calvin returns home for the same reasons he left: he wants to be his own authority. As night breaks and Hobbes does not return, nature suddenly transforms from a place of freedom into a place of danger for Hobbes, and Calvin's parents go out in the dark woods to look for him. In the second incident, when Calvin dresses up as a tiger, he quickly learns that he cannot identify as a tiger: He is bored with sitting in a tree, he does not want to "catch big gross caterpillars" for lunch as Hobbes suggests (*Author* 143), and Hobbes seems to know so little about tigers himself that Calvin has to look up "tiger" in an encyclopaedia. As they read that tigers live in territories, they erect two territories and argue about the size of each one. After twelve dailies, Calvin is disappointed by the rather dull experience: "So far, I haven't had much fun as a tiger. I thought we'd be romping around the woods like we always do, but it turns out tigers don't share their territories with other tigers! So here we are, sitting on opposite sides of a big rock. What a blast. Being a tiger just isn't all it's cracked up to be" (*Author* 143). When Hobbes then reads that tigers are an endangered species, both are shocked, and Calvin decides to be a

³⁸ The comic book in which this story appears, *Yukon Ho!*, was published in 1989, only three years before Christopher McCandless died in Alaska.

³⁹ Cf. ch. 5.2.2 on theology and the human condition.

child again. Calvin realizes that changing his nature and adapting to the wildlife as a tiger is not his true disposition.



In both incidents, Calvin has to realize that nature is not what he expected it to be and returns home disappointed. When he learns that tigers are an endangered species, he lets go of his idea of being a tiger, and the problems on the Yukon expedition teach him that the problems of civilization still haunt him when he leaves his familiar surroundings. Calvin conceptualizes nature as a benevolent and romantic place where he can escape modern society and be his own authority. But each time he goes into solitude with Hobbes, he is confronted with his own human nature and flaws. Therefore, Calvin prefers to stay in comfortable civilization after all.

“Something’s always stinging you or oozing mucus on you”: The Downsides of Nature

Although Calvin is attracted to romantic nature, he is also disgusted by it at the same time. To a large extent, Calvin’s leisure time is shaped by mass media, and compared to the entertainment brought to him by cable TV and the comfort of consumer culture, nature is less comfortable.

Calvin is repeatedly confronted with the fact that nature is uncomfortable and not made to suit man. When the family drives to the beach, Calvin complains nonstop. The sand is too hot, the water too cold, and eventually he and Hobbes prefer to stay in the air-conditioned car (*CnH* 109). Calvin is bothered by the fact that nature is not made to suit him. When Calvin jumps in a pile of foliage, Hobbes calls to attention the bugs: “Sometimes slugs hide under the leaves. Ugh, just imagine one of those slimy muckballs slipping up your pant leg! There might be dozens in there!” (*Drooling* 32). Calvin is disgusted: “That is the problem with

nature. Something's always stinging you or oozing mucus on you. Let's go watch TV." Watching TV is more attractive to Calvin as it requires little personal risk and little initiative from Calvin himself.

Calvin's antipathy toward nature is heightened in contrast to his father's reverence and devoted love even for the inconveniences of nature. The father is portrayed as an early riser who wakes before dawn just so he can witness the beauty of the sunrise and as a dedicated cyclist who fearlessly surmounts any obstacle nature holds ready for him. In one comic strip, the father is seen cycling through nature, but his description of the journey ironically contradicts the illustration: His praise for the quietness and serenity is accompanied by the panel in which dogs chase him, and when he sighs "no distractions, no irritations," he is seen being haunted by a swarm of flies (*Packed* 123).

Image and text form an ironic juxtaposition and reveal the uncomfortable sides of nature. Calvin cannot comprehend his father's closeness to nature. This clash of interests is seen to its fullest extent each year when Calvin's father convinces the family to go camping. Usually, the holidays result in a large family argument, as Calvin's mother is not fond of camping either and would prefer to stay in a hotel. Calvin's guess as to why his father wants to go camping is that he "likes to watch us all suffer," which for Calvin means the same as his father's declared goal to "build character" through camping (*Indis* 107). Calvin's objection to camping is mainly the lack of luxury and media: "Man, this is boring. I wish there was a movie theater someplace" (*CnH* 113). Calvin hates being forced to be outside in nature, and he feels that he is missing out on the virtual reality presented in TV. When Calvin and Hobbes sit out in nature and look at a stunning sunset, Calvin mourns, "I'll bet I'm missing some great TV shows" (*Indis* 109).



For Calvin, in an immediate comparison, nature cannot compete with the conveniences of civilization, and he cannot understand how one would voluntarily give up any comfort for mosquito bites, no TV, full exposure to rain, and food cooked over a fireplace. Although nature holds a mysterious attraction for Calvin, he still has an aversion against its rawness. Calvin proves again to be a child of the eighties by displaying sensitivity, growing up with mass media, and when it comes to the decision between the filtered TV shows or actual reality, he opts for the filtered reality.

5.4.3 “Sometimes I think the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us”:
Man and Nature

Calvin has a paradoxical concept of nature: On the one hand, he sees it as a place of utter freedom (that he cannot reach) and, on the other, he is shaped by television culture and wants to have as little interaction with nature as possible. The comics do not only touch on how Calvin conceptualizes nature, but also address the important question of the intervention of man in nature, climate change, and pollution. It is one issue that has a less humorous overtone than the ones dealing with the concept of nature, and Watterson dares to address the complexities of human existence on this earth.

Calvin sees himself confronted with man's careless interaction with the environment, and he is well aware of it. Even when Calvin and Hobbes joke, they are aware of the horrors of pollution. When Calvin thinks about his Halloween costume, he wants to go as the scariest thing he can think of, and so he decides to dress up as “a barrel of toxic waste” (*Drooling* 39). When Calvin has the hiccups and asks Hobbes to scare him, Hobbes replies, “Our oceans are filled with garbage, we've created a hole in the ozone that's frying the planet, nuclear waste is piling up without any safe way to get rid of it...” As Calvin replies, “(hic) I mean, SURPRISE me (hic).” Hobbes is astonished, “That doesn't?! Boy, you're cynical” (*Indis* 67).

For the two, man's treatment of the environment is not only horrifying but also the surest indicator for the stupidity of mankind. In probably the most famous comic strip, they lament the extinction of species

through man, and Calvin concludes: "Sometimes I think the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us" (*Indis* 157). Again, Calvin's verdict over mankind is bleak, claiming not only that mankind is stupid, but also that mankind's stupidity has reached the lowest bar possible. Calvin and Hobbes address human short-sightedness and stupidity again when they look at trash in the woods and complain, "People seem to forget that others of us have to live on this planet too. You know, I don't understand why humans evolved as such thoughtless, shortsighted creatures" (*Treasure* 113). The entire comic strip plays with empty space, and the colors are greyish and yellow-brown, like trash. Calvin and Hobbes see themselves confronted with the overwhelming stupidity of the anonymous collective of "humans." The lack of a punch line or a humorous suggestion of a solution lends the comic strip a tone of frustration and resignation. Again, Calvin and Hobbes are confronted with an overwhelmingly large and unsolvable problem (see: p. 256).

The tone of resignation accompanies the environmental comic strips. This hopelessness is expressed in a wordless daily when Calvin and Hobbes stare at a pile of trash left in the woods, and Calvin facepalms. The strip is in black and white, thus contrasting the far spread beauty of nature, the creek and the trees, with the trash left by man (*Drooling* 36). It is an expression of the helplessness and frustration Calvin and Hobbes display at the sight of the trash, and they realize that pollution is beyond their power.



With pollution, Calvin sees himself confronted with a problem neither caused by himself, nor easy to solve. So he sets out to find the culprit, the older generation, and he wonders if there is any way for him to "refuse to inherit the world" (*Drooling* 99). As his parents are the only two representatives of the older generation close to Calvin, he blames his mother, "Sure, YOU'LL be gone when it happens, but I won't! Nice



planet you're leaving me!" (Author 41). He complains to Hobbes, "Have you been reading the papers? Grown-ups really have the world fouled up. Acid rain, toxic wastes, holes in the ozone, sewage in the oceans, and on and on!" (Author 220). Calvin realizes that he has to cope with a problem that is not only overwhelming but also caused by a generation

of people who will not have to cope with the long-term consequences of their actions. However, as his anger and blaming do not solve the problem, Calvin is left alone with the issue.

So, Calvin wonders about the possibility of escaping the polluted planet. He feels he should not be held responsible to solve a problem he did not cause, and so Calvin packs to leave the earth: "Get your toothbrush, Hobbes. We're outta here. It's an outrage how grown-ups have polluted the earth! I refuse to inherit a spoiled planet! I'm LEAVING!" (*Author* 220). As there is no unpolluted place left on the earth, Calvin and Hobbes set out for Mars, an escape into a new space, the wilderness, to start anew. When Watterson published that comic strip in 1988, the Apollo 11 moon landing of 1969 approached its twentieth anniversary. A first full view of the earth was possible, and through the extensive television coverage, environmental ideas to protect the blue planet reached the mainstream consciousness (Haq and Paul 77). On 22 April 1970, the Earth Day was proposed by Senator Gaylord Nelson for the first time. In the sixties and seventies, being "green" became a part of the counterculture; awareness for the environment and responsibility for the blue planet grew. *Calvin and Hobbes* shows how that idea even sank down into the consciousness of popular culture. In one comic strip, Watterson's illustration of the earth extends over four panels, making them separate units and yet presenting one coherent picture (*Author* 221). However, in each panel, Calvin and Hobbes are disappearing further in the void of the universe until they are but a tiny white dot, whereas the earth remains the same constant size in the foreground.



It precedes and ties in with a comic strip in which Calvin then philosophizes once again about man's insignificance in sight of the universe:

When you see earth as a tiny blue speck in the infinite reaches of space, you have to wonder about the mysteries of creation. Surely we're all part of some great design, no more or less important than anything else in the universe. Surely everything fits together and has a purpose, a reason for being. Doesn't it make you wonder? (*Author* 222)

Eventually, they arrive on Mars – a planet “brand new and unspoiled. No people, no pollution. Nothing but rugged, natural beauty as far as the eye can see” (*Author* 223). But soon they realize that Martians inhabit Mars, and Calvin and Hobbes reckon: “Maybe Martians don't like Earthlings.” As Calvin tries to explain to the Martians that man destroyed their own planet and that he is therefore looking for a new one, he realizes that it is not convincing, and Hobbes agrees, “Would you welcome in a dog that wasn't house-trained?” (*Author* 224). So, as they anticipate that the Martians do not welcome them, they return home.

Similar to the issue of the sinful heart that man cannot get rid of, Calvin also brings his human nature with him to the planet. In a minor incident on Mars, Calvin reveals how little he would be able to keep a new planet clean, namely when he throws a candy bar wrapper on the ground. Hobbes looks at him strictly and rebukes him: “That's not your candy bar wrapper over there, is it?” Calvin defends himself, “It was just there a minute! I wasn't going to leave it” (*Author* 223). In a small incident, the reader learns that despite Calvin's best intentions he would not be able to take good care of a new planet himself and that he is as much a part of the larger problem of pollution as the rest of mankind. Calvin and Hobbes returning to Earth shows that they are not only bound to their old planet, and that there is no “Planet B,” but their journey also reveals a human nature they cannot leave behind. They have to face the problem and cannot escape from it.

Although Calvin clearly sees the problem, he refuses to take any action: When he complains about his mother leaving him such a destroyed planet, his mother's reply reveals Calvin's true attitude: “This from the kid who wants to be chauffeured any place more than a block away” (*Author* 41). Taking responsibility for his actions is nothing that occurs to Calvin – although in the eighties, “consumer sovereignty” and the possibility to boycott products was a successful means for activists (Haq and Paul 80). Boycotts were a response to the Reagan Revolution and the deregulation of the market, which meant a higher privatization and fewer restrictions for manufacturers and producers. Individual customers

were left with a higher responsibility to purchase green products and to stand up for “green consumerism” if they wanted to do something for the environment (Merchant 199). Due to boycotts, the clothing line Benetton, for instance, stopped animal testing, and Nestlé had to adopt an international code for marketing baby milk substitutes in the developing world (ibid. 81). In 1988, McDonald’s was attacked by environmental groups EDF, Earth Action Network, and Kids Against Pollution because of the harmful ingredients contained in their food (ibid 82). Personal abstinence of a luxury good for a higher cause is nothing that occurs to Calvin. Instead, his behavior is that of a consumer kid who blames the older generation for not living responsibly, but who himself shares the same flaws. He is totally addicted to fast food, mass media, loves the air-conditioned car, and does not care about anybody other than himself. He does not even remotely think about the next generation himself, thereby perpetuating his parents’ mistake. The only solution to the problem would be for Calvin to act responsibly as an individual. However, Calvin turns into an armchair activist: he sees the problem but is too lazy to really fight it.

In that respect, the comic strips unearth the human tendency to direct guilt at someone else instead of accepting responsibility when appropriate. Calvin subtly mirrors and criticizes the paradox of being aware of environmental problems and an unwillingness to counteract them. Watterson does not offer any overhasty and easy solutions to the overwhelming pollution issue. On the contrary, he sketches an unsolvable problem and confronts the reader with it. Yet, the comics reveal how the problem cannot be ignored. The only response the comics give is that each individual is responsible for their own behavior, and blaming the rest of the world will not contribute to finding a solution. His daily ‘funnies’ contain a quiet wake-up call for his newspaper readership to deal with environmental problems and to show respect for nature. Watterson does not call for great action, but he quietly reminds the reader to act responsibly in small daily life decisions.

5.5 Mass Media

5.5.1 "... the mind is like a car battery – it recharges by running": Mass Media and the Eighties

As *Calvin and Hobbes* covers a variety of social issues of the eighties, the series also discusses the rise and impact of mass media on a young generation with special regard to mass media's most successful agent: television. In the eighties, as TV consumption and the influence of TV and media in society grew, Bill Watterson used the comics as a platform to present his general stance on mass media, and TV in particular, a stance he openly revealed in his Kenyon College Speech in 1990: "Our idea of relaxing is all too often to plop down in front of the television set and let its pandering idiocy liquefy our brains. Shutting off the thought process is not rejuvenating; the mind is like a car battery – it recharges by running" ("Some Thoughts"). Watterson criticizes the overarching and ever-increasing power of TV as well as the industry behind it.⁴⁰ Watterson's rather conservative and critical stance on television condemns both light and silly entertainment as well as the open display of violence in TV programs accessible to children. In the comics, Watterson does not refer to specific channels or programs but vaguely describes media content as either silly or violent. Unlike socio-scientific research, the comics approach the topic from a humorous and entertaining angle. It should also be noted that the comics do not present an overall criticism of TV as such, but are a tongue-in-cheek criticism of the low quality and the resulting impact of (over-)consumption of low-quality shows. *Calvin and Hobbes* discusses why Calvin is attracted to TV and the impact consumption has on him.

Again, Bill Watterson's criticism does not come out of the blue, but is embedded in a broader social context. The United States has always been a TV nation, but the eighties were a decade in which changes in television culture happened on a larger scale. Watterson incorporates a discussion of the content of media and the impact of a high consumption on children in the comics.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, most of the comic strips dealing with the impact of TV were published later in his career in the nineties.

5.5.2 “This is sensationalism! . . . Fortunately, that’s all I have the patience for”: The Impact of the Media on Calvin

Children’s consumption of television grew: In 1950, American households spent an average of 4.5 hours a day watching TV, which increased to 7.25 hours a day in 1998. A statistic by Comstock and Paik from 1991 revealed that 60% of American children were watching TV on Saturdays at 10 am (Bushman and Huesmann 226). Therefore, the heated debate about the relationship of children and the TV industry specifically targeting children has a strong leg to stand on.

For the broadcasters, children were, and still are, are a valuable audience as they have “spending power”: As Gunter, Oates, and Blades write in 2005, “Children 12 years or younger in the United States controlled the spending of \$28 billion in 2000. This was spending from their own allowances and earnings. In addition, they influenced \$250 billion of family spending” (Gunter et al 2). Although the number was still lower in the 1980s and 90s, it doubled between 1990 and 2000, showing what an important economic factor children are and why children become such a target audience for the television business. Throughout Watterson’s comics, mass media has a negative appearance both in their strategy for reaching how to reach to the individual customers and especially children and the effect they have on Calvin.

Calvin is a high-consumer of media. He loves watching TV, and his understanding of how to spend his leisure time repeatedly clashes with his parents’ understanding how children should spend their time. It is mostly Calvin’s father who wants to convince him to read a book (*CnH* 105) or who thinks children should be outside romping around (*Drooling* 100). Calvin prefers to be inside to watch TV. He does not watch educational programs; the shows he watches are either silly, sensational, or both, addressing the emotions of the viewer instead of rendering facts, which in a twenty-first century age of Fake News has gained an unexpected topicality.

The content of media had traditionally been censored by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the NAB, the National Association of Broadcasters. The FCC was created by the Communications Act of 1934 and functioned as an independent federal agency that answered directly to Congress. It was more a regulatory association than an executive one: “the FCC was charged with regulating interstate and

international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable. The FCC was empowered to make rules and regulations, hold hearings, and fine those entities it licensed or revoked their licenses” (Bensman 214). In 1952, the Television Board of Directors of the NAB enacted the “Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters” that provided regulation for the content of television (“Television Code”). Similar to the Comics Code enacted in 1954, the Television Code gives specific rules for broadcasters, such as the public display of religion,⁴¹ family values,⁴² crime,⁴³ general behavior,⁴⁴ and the treatment of animals.⁴⁵ But the Code (commonly known as the “Codes of Good Practice” as programs that underwent the censorship of the code received the “Seal of Good Practice” shown at the end credits of the TV program) also included a restriction on running advertisements. In 1982, however, the Code was dismissed. Together with a rise in demand for television and a broader offer, this led to an inflation of nudity and violence in TV programs.

The TV shows Calvin watches are full of pointless violence and depict common information as sensational breaking news. The reader learns about the stupidity but also of the pointless violence in the TV shows through Calvin’s description: “Classic humor. THIS is what entertainment is all about.... idiots, explosives, and falling anvils” (*CnH* 83). Calvin rejoices, “You call this NEWS?! THIS isn’t informative! This is a sound bite! This is entertainment! This is sensationalism!” However, instead of switching the channel, he concludes, “Fortunately, that’s all I have the patience for” (*Packed* 96). In a humorous and hyperbolic way, Calvin intelligently unearths the mechanisms the industry uses to blindfold the audience. He does not care about his insight,

⁴¹ “Reverence is to mark any mention of the name of God, His attributes and powers” (“Television Code” 2).

⁴² “Respect is maintained for the sanctity of marriage and the value of the home. Divorce is not treated casually nor justified as a solution for marital problems” (2).

⁴³ “Sex crimes and abnormalities are generally unacceptable as program material” (2).

⁴⁴ “Contests may not constitute a lottery” (2).

⁴⁵ “The use of animals, both in the production of television programs and as a part of television program content, shall at all times, be in conformity with accepted standards of humane treatment” (3).

though, and instead of opposing the manipulation through mass media, he strangely accepts its influence and is even victimized by sensational news distribution. Moreover, Calvin copies the strategy when writing his own newspaper report on the events of the household. His mother cutting a fish is turned into the headline, “Knife Wielding Mother Hacks Ichthyoid! Grim Melee is Evening Ritual! Suburban Family Devours Victim!” (*Indis* 174). Media studies reveal that young children copy habits and manners presented in TV, and Calvin does the same: To gain the reader’s interest, Calvin stirs emotions and sensationalism.

In *Calvin and Hobbes*, mass media is presented as a medium that attempts to influence the audience by perverted means, and although Calvin realizes this strategy, he does not oppose it but he turns the table. In front of the TV, complaining that the programs are rotten, Calvin wonders, “Who do they think is stupid enough to sit and watch this trash?” Brutally, Hobbes, replies, “You” (*Indis* 38). It is the same reaction as when he is confronted with environmental problems – Calvin clearly sees the issues with the TV industry, but deliberately decides to disregard them. That makes him complicit in the industry. Calvin is not only blind to the problems of the future, as he proves in his arguments about environmental issues and large corporations that steer mass media and impact the consumer in his present time.

Because Calvin detects the mechanisms, it seems still odd that he does not merely ignore the mass media. He always returns to watching TV, and it does not occur to him to simply walk off and leave mass media behind. There are several reasons for why Calvin falls for the medium although he understands it well.

5.5.3 “Life overall should be more glamorous, thrill-packed, and filled with applause, don’t you think?”: Calvin’s Attraction to Media

Why people watch TV and why children in particular are attracted to violent TV programs has occupied social scientists. However, there is not one clear-cut answer: “Just as we cannot treat media content as though it were monolithic, we cannot treat children as though they respond to media in exactly the same way” (Jordan and Romer xiii). It is impossible to give one all-encompassing answer as each viewer has a different story and different reasons. Researchers have thus attempted to

boil the answers down to the most prominent reasons. In 1998, Joanne Cantor detected three major reasons for why children watch violent programs: 1. enjoyment, 2. selective exposure (or “how much a viewer’s knowledge that a program contains violence increases his or her interest in seeing it”) and 3. genre popularity (Cantor 90). In 2012, Steven J. Kirsh, who follows the model of Uses and Gratifications Perspective (UGP), grouped the answers into different categories: Companionship, escape, habit, learning, passing time, relaxation, sensation seeking vicarious aggression, identity formation, defiance of restriction, empowerment, social status, mood management, and self-determination (Kirsh 78). That broad range alone reflects the complexity of media studies. Although *Calvin and Hobbes* is not a scientific study, the comics reveal three main reasons for why Calvin is attracted to TV. Interestingly, the three reasons correspond with the three major reasons Kirsh unearths in his research: Boredom (which Kirsh describes as “habit”), the fear of missing out (“companionship”), and escape.

Habit: Calvin’s habit of watching TV stems from his general boredom. Boredom goes deeper than mere enjoyment of watching TV – it is the lack of interest in other occupations. Calvin claims that there is “nothing to do” (*CnH* 33), and although he loves his summer holidays, he strolls through the woods and complains, “I can’t believe there’s nothing on TV but repeats” (*Author* 46). When their TV is stolen, Calvin does not know what to do in the evening other than “eat my asparagus, do my homework, and go straight to bed, then” (*Indis* 76). That frequent watching turns into a habit for Calvin, which paralyzes him, as he does not seem interested in other occupations. However, it is more than habit – it is an addiction. When Calvin’s mother forbids TV for a week, Calvin sits in front of TV “all week even if I can’t turn it on” (*Indis* 222). His desire to watch TV goes much deeper than to lack of ideas about what to play. Though it is not a physical addiction, he displays the features of an addict. When Hobbes asks why Calvin would not watch a show he does not like, he only complains, “This clean, wholesome television! Ughh, it makes me sick!” (*Indis* 105). Calvin even watches the shows he explicitly does not like only to complain about them.

But then Calvin also watches because of the pressure of the masses and the fear of missing out. Although Kirsh applies this more to a peer group and the need for companionship, for Calvin there is a real fear. The mass media creates a sense of what is ‘in’ and en vogue, thereby

also creating a sense of community amongst viewers. In the comics, ads play a major role as a means to prescribe a lifestyle, thus making the viewer dependent on the product, and TV becomes the authority in prescribing common taste. In addition, the commercials are short and serve the purpose of reaching an audience with a short attention span (*Cat* 84). As they suggest a living standard, a standard of coolness, they make the audience believe that it is the use of the suggested fashion and products that moulds the quality of a person. For Calvin, the advertising industry has reached its goal: Calvin wishes he could wear a t-shirt with a logo printed on it ("endorsing products is the American way to express individuality" [*Indis* 136]). It is the paradox of appealing to the taste of masses while claiming individuality. Calvin's reverse conclusion is that if a product is not approved by the masses, it cannot be good. Thus he does not want his father to read him a bedtime story that has not won any notable prizes (*Indis* 123).

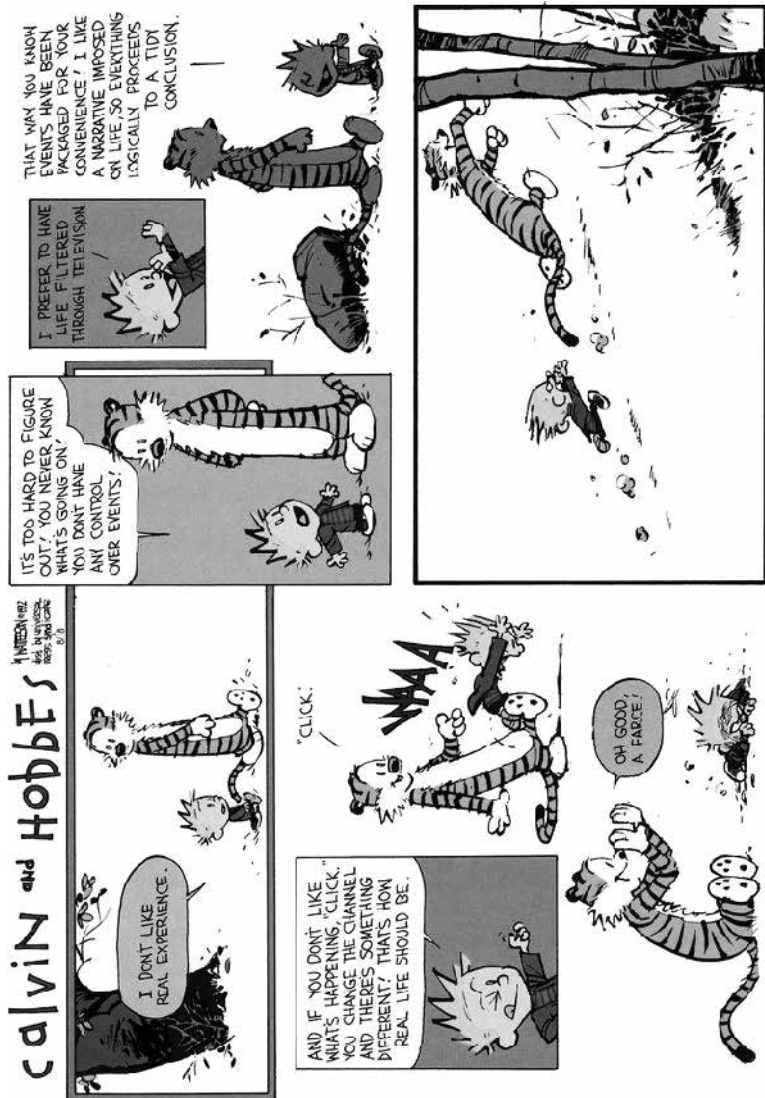
The assumption that art should appeal to the common taste of the masses originated in the sixties with the rise of mass media and pop art. Whatever the masses approve must be good, and, even worse, must be true. This failure of the power of the masses to decide what is good and right is the basis of Calvin's whole presumption. Being connected with the world lends Calvin's small world importance and a broader framework, and seemingly makes it possible for him to connect to the rest of the world. In return, not being connected means to miss out on something, and so he tries to convince his father to get cable TV by arguing that people across the country are watching different shows: "If we don't all watch the same TV, what will keep our culture homogeneous?" (*Packed* 137). For Calvin, cable TV shapes his culture. Of course, that does not convince his father, who murmurs, "There's still McDonald's and Wal-Mart." Until the eighties, television had been dominated by the "Big Three," the three channels ABC, NBC, and CBS. The monopoly changed with the introduction of cable television programs via communications satellite in 1975. This fast and cheap communication system led to the development of new programs and revolutionized the communications industry (Howard and Ogles 116). The sources of programming also changed in the eighties: Independents, superstations, pay-per-view, basic and premium cable, and videocassette recorders broadened the offer and increased consumerism (Comstock 122). By the nineties, the majority of American households received cable TV that served the

individual taste of the audience. For Calvin, the fear of missing out on something that the rest of the world knows turns into reality.

In the framework of the comic strip, Calvin's desire to be connected with the anonymous masses appears not only paradox but also ridiculous. Calvin's six-year-old world is shaped by the adventures of childhood, and his friendship with Hobbes is so precious to him that he does not seem to lack anything. Yet he longs to be connected with an anonymous group merely because he is driven by the fear of missing out on something he does not even know. This fear drives him to fall for mass media instead of enjoying his life. Instead of enjoying a wonderful sunset at the campsite, he complains, "I'll bet I'm missing some great TV shows" (*Indis* 109), or he gets up in the middle of the night to watch TV because suddenly a thought struck him: "Well, suppose there's no after-life. That would mean THIS life is all you get" (*Indis* 148). This fear of missing out and not being up to date haunts Calvin.

But most of all, it is the promise of a more exciting and controllable life – an escape – that motivates Calvin to watch TV. When his mother sends him outside to play instead of watching TV, Calvin complains, "It's too hot! It's too bright! It's too humid! It's too buggy! IT'S TOO REAL!" (*Packed* 105). For Calvin, TV is a control mechanism; it is customized to his needs and desires and can get rid of all inconveniences. TV filters away the harshness of life, and merely by changing the channel, unpleasant events can be ignored (*Packed* 158).

His desire to have "a narrative imposed on life, so everything logically proceeds to a tidy conclusion" is a way to escape a messy reality and adjust the narrative to his life. The panel frames and the background are primarily kept in muddy ochre earth colors or in shades of a purple (which is also a secondary color) to reflect the impurity of reality. Again, the denouement is provided by Hobbes, who literally applies this worldview on his immediate situation with Calvin by pushing Calvin in the mud and pretending to have changed the channel. Again, Calvin displays the underlying egocentrism of his worldview. His concept falls to pieces as soon as someone else applies it to him. Calvin even explicitly complains that "life should be more like TV." He wishes for a more action-driven life, and he concludes: "Life overall should be more glamorous, thrill-packed, and filled with applause, don't you think?" (*Indis* 94). Again, Calvin feels that his life is not exciting enough, and TV is a perfect way to facelift it (see: p. 267).



But Calvin also has to learn that reality and TV differ. When he realizes he has the power over the TV, to turn it on and off with the remote control, he goes to his father and clicks the remote control in his direction to turn his father off. When he realizes that this does not work in

real life, he mourns, “Rats” (*CnH* 34). He tries to apply the virtual reality to his real life but is confronted with the discrepancy between TV and real life.

Calvin embodies the major reasons for watching television: He watches not only out of boredom but also out of a fear of missing out and a need to escape his seemingly unexciting daily life. Though the comics are not intended as a scientific study, Calvin’s reasons for being attracted to TV correspond to scientific research on the matter. The comics are highly exaggerated and parodistic, as Calvin clearly voices why he watches TV despite seeing its fallacies. Watterson sketches a fairly realistic image of the television industry and of a child in the eighties that falls for mass media; the effects on Calvin have – although they are exaggerated – a truthful core.

5.5.4 “Now that I’m on television, . . . I’m famous! Important!”: The Impact of Mass Media on Calvin

Ever since television came into existence, scholars and sociologists have researched the effects of mass media and television on the audience, in particular on children. What is true for the causes of watching TV is also true for the effects: There is not one monolithic viewer, and the results and effects vary and are distinguished depending on the audience and age group. Thus, results are often distinguished in different age groups (cf. Comstock and Paik). The results are as diverse, depending on the focus of the study. Different focuses can, for instance, be on how consumption shapes everyday experience, social and behavioral effects (of which violence is the most researched topic), psychological impacts, or the broader-scale impacts on childhood in general. In 1985, Joshua Meyrowitz argued in *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* that the constant exposure to violence in TV bereaves children of their childhood, and children “speak more like adults, dress more like adults, and behave more like adults than they used to” (227). In the same way, Neil Postman argues in *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) that direct exposure to violence bereaves children of their childhood. The impact of TV on children was highly discussed in the eighties and TV was partially even demonized as the medium to blame for all the evil in the world. TV impacts Calvin

physically and in the way he views and interacts with the world. The impact on Calvin is again highly exaggerated and thus turns into a parody of reality. However, despite the humorous tone, the relevance of the topic and its accordance with current research also have a tragic ring.

There is no doubt of a correlation between the consumption of TV and the physicality of children, of which obesity is an extreme effect.⁴⁶ In 2004, Morrill and Chinn write:

Watching television contributes to overweight in children. American children watch, on average, 19 hours and 40 minutes of TV per week – more than a thousand hours each year. . . . Watching TV is sedentary, and reduces available playtime. Moreover, each year it exposes child viewers to an average of 40,000 advertisements, many promoting junk food and fast food. In short, the more TV children watch, the more likely they are to be overweight. (359)

The bridge from watching TV to obesity, or other health issues, is the physical and mental passivity TV endorses. As Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi examine, watching TV also reduces concentration, challenge, and skill (81), and that is what happens to Calvin. In one comic strip, he lies motionless on the sofa and explains to Hobbes how he turns utterly passive while watching TV, how he tries “not to swallow either, so I drool. And I keep my eyes half-focused, so I don’t use any muscles at all” (*Packed* 20). In another comic where he refuses to play outside with Hobbes but passively wants to watch TV, Hobbes leaves and says, “I’ll tell your Mom to turn you toward the light and water you periodically” (*Indis* 169). In this humorous and exaggerated strip, Calvin seems to have lost all of his human functions, and his body has been reduced to the state of a plant that merely sets out to survive. Interestingly, in both strips Hobbes leaves Calvin alone. Meyrowitz writes about “the separation of social place from physical place” as an effect of television consumption (115). Here, Calvin’s physical place is detached from his social place as his friend Hobbes leaves him: watching TV thus becomes a physically solitary occupation.

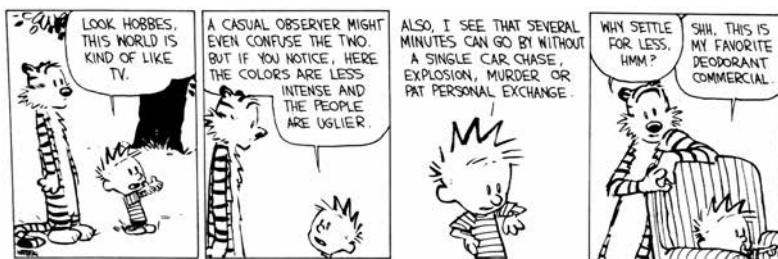
Calvin also does not experience life himself anymore, but only watches how other people experience life. “Real-life video programs”

⁴⁶ Although at times TV can also motivate the audience to do more sports. See: Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 151.

are described by him as “intrusion, exploitation, and voyeurism all in one! . . . I love to snicker at other people’s tragedy” (*Cat* 157). His attention span is also reduced, Calvin explains: “I think the short attention span of television is great. As far as I’m concerned, if something is so complicated that you can’t explain it in 10 seconds, then it’s probably not worth knowing anyway. My time is valuable. I can’t go thinking about one subject for minutes on end. I’m a busy man.” And Hobbes interjects: “...who’s been sitting here for three hours.” and Calvin finishes, “... at six thoughts a minute” (*Indis* 25). Calvin’s passivity emotionally drains him, just as Watterson says that “the mind is like a car battery – it recharges by running” (“Some Thoughts”). The blunt exaggeration of Calvin’s passivity and the reduction of his body functions to that of a plant makes readers laugh, but at the same time also reminds them of the seriousness of the topic.

The consumption of TV also impacts Calvin’s perception of reality. John Condry describes how the attitudes, beliefs and judgments of heavy viewers of TV shift away from reality and more toward life as presented in TV, and how TV eventually creeps into the value system of the viewer. This impacts the amount of violence shown in TV, but also the often negative way older people are shown on television, for instance. This phenomenon is described by Gerbner and his colleagues as “mainstreaming” (Condry 140-41). Likewise, Calvin’s perceptions and his expectations for life are altered by TV. His high consumption of mass media distorts his perception of reality. When he watches the commercials, he asks his father, “How come you don’t drive a cool sports car like that guy? . . . And look at the babes he’s with. How come Mom doesn’t dress like this?” (*Packed* 46). But TV eventually also distracts him from truly important issues, and so Calvin admits: “I know more about the private lives of celebrities than I do about any governmental policy that will actually affect me. I’m interested in things that are none of my business, and I’m bored by things that are important to know.” He cleverly concludes, “Maybe the economy should be discussed in cheap motel rooms” (*Cat* 112). This distraction turns TV fiction into an immediate competitor to reality and to the important questions in life. Once again under the starry sky he ponders the vastness of the galaxy: “In cosmic terms, we are subatomic particles in a grain of sand on an infinite beach.” He and Hobbes stare into the void for one panel, but instead of pondering more on the unimportance of human life, he looks at his

watch and says, “I wonder what’s on TV now” (*Killer* 51). The constant distraction of television makes it impossible for him to think about the consequences of life. TV eventually determines his life and becomes a competitor to reality. Whenever he is outside, he is scared of missing out on something on TV, and his TV shows seem to become a more exciting substitute for his real life. As a consequence, real life and TV life merge into Calvin’s life as a presence (*Cat* 120), as Calvin remarks that a “casual observer might even confuse the two [this world and TV].”



In that respect, TV becomes such a tangible reality for Calvin that it eventually becomes his purpose in life. When he creates his own TV channel (by using a cardboard as a screen), he pulls his self-esteem from being on TV: “Now that I’m on television, I’m different from everybody else! I’m famous! Important! Since everyone knows me, everything I do now is newsworthy. I’m a cultural icon” (*Killer* 43). TV teaches him that popularity is more important than personality and actual achievements, so he plans his future as a TV celebrity; instead of getting an education, he plans on attaining TV fame as an alternative plan (*Indis* 121). Media becomes his goal in life.

The impact of TV and mass media on Calvin however goes yet another step further. TV not only impacts his whole perception and the way he attaches importance to things, but he even worships TV as a god. This transcendental and religious step is the last missing step in how by being passive, he actively lets TV take over his life. He asks the “great altar of passive entertainment” to bestow upon him the “discordant images at such a speed as to render linear thought impossible” (*Killer* 49).

In a last comic strip, Calvin even surrenders his brain: “Oh greatest of the mass media. Thank you for elevating emotion, reducing thought, and stifling imagination. Thank you for the artificiality of quick solutions and for the insidious manipulation of human desires for commercial purposes.” And so Calvin bows before his TV to bring his offering:

"This bowl of lukewarm tapioca represents my brain. I offer it in humble sacrifice. Bestow thy flickering light forever" (*Packed* 125). Calvin uses the English language of the King James Version full of Biblical phrases: "greatest of the," "I offer it in my humble sacrifice" – these terms are usually known from a religious context. The language itself alludes to Calvin's submission to mass media as a god-like institution. It is the peak of how TV controls his life: The utter senselessness of TV determines Calvin's whole existence and takes full control over his life, but only because Calvin allows it to happen.

The whole discussion is a tongue-in-cheek parody, yet also a bitterly serious discussion about the impacts of TV on a young audience. The fact that the reasons why Calvin watches TV and the impacts of it on his life correspond with actual research reveals how, despite their humorous value, the comic strips convey a highly exaggerated but at their core truthful depictions of the mechanisms of mass media. By using the humorous medium of comic strips, Bill Watterson does not moralize by prescribing to the reader what to think and feel about television. Instead, by exaggerating the whole issue of TV in an entertaining way, he illustrates the absurdity of the whole entertainment industry.

6 CONCLUSION

Bill Watterson is an artist who shows the multifaceted capabilities of newspaper comic strips. His body of art and his comments shed light on newspaper comic strips as seen by someone who takes comics seriously as an art form.

Historically, newspaper comic strips have undergone massive changes, for as soon as they had developed their narrative features by the early twentieth century, they encountered immediate competition from film and comic books. That, of course, shaped the way artists saw the medium, and by the eighties newspaper comic strips had turned into a medium of commerce and entertainment. Watterson's statement on comics as art are thus all the more daring, as they were created in an age in which artists had come to terms with a low quality standard. His speech "On the Cheapening of the Comics" is the acme of his stance on the state of comics. Watterson thus used his series to show the potential of newspaper comics and to raise the genre to a new level of quality.

Watterson's work reveals the narrative and graphic qualities of newspaper comic strips, and shows how short stories told in just a few panels can move beyond a gag a day. He does not only know how to employ storytelling techniques and the visual media, but his comics reveal the quality of humor in newspaper comic strips. Newspaper comic strips repeatedly raise pressing questions without providing answers or jumping to conclusions. The comics do not move forward in their narration despite constant momentum. By repeatedly posing questions, Watterson reveals how comics can convey truth nevertheless in a sense that they comment on the *conditio humana* and parody, but also challenge, a culture, an age, a zeitgeist, and humorously even unpack and debunk a reader's own intentions and moments of selfishness.

Watterson's pairing of the characters is smart because it fits the narrative rhythm of the comic strip. Calvin's character responds to the everlasting unchanging state of newspaper comic strip characters. Because Calvin refuses to learn any life lesson, he remains the same, as the narration in newspaper comic strips requires. Hobbes leads a hybrid exis-

tence between man and nature and illustrates the unique use of animal characters – he overcomes the boundaries between man and nature and his character blends into a perfect hybrid of a carnivore with anthropomorphic features leading a peaceful existence in civilization. The successful adaptation of an animal into a civilized human setting and his peaceful temper makes Hobbes's entire existence an ironic comment on Thomas Hobbes's philosophy that regarded man as someone whose selfishness turns him into a wolf.

Watterson uses his comics and his characters to express "truth," as he himself repeatedly says, as a vehicle to seriously comment on issues. In that respect, Watterson is a moralist: he unearths argumentative shortcomings and loopholes. However, he is not a moralizer in that he obtrudes his opinions on the readership, but in that he humorously highlights the *conditio humana* and demonstrates human weaknesses without jumping to rash conclusions. Watterson drags the theological questions of John Calvin into the postmodern context and parodies the selfishness of his age. Watterson also debunks the empty rhetoric of postmodern artists, and with a quiet wagging of the finger, he reminds readers of the finite resources of the blue planet. Through Calvin's almost sarcastic overconsumption of mass media, Watterson demonstrates the impact of it. Although it is not covered in this study, Watterson also takes up topics like education and the school system. Calvin hates school and repeatedly wonders how school adequately prepares him for the twenty-first century. By presenting to his father the results of the polls Calvin conducted among all six-years old in the household concerning the current degree of his father's popularity, Calvin comments on the formation of political opinion. Although Watterson hardly uses any explicit references to the eighties and the nineties, his comic strips are rooted in his age. Yet they carry timelessness as they address issues and comment on the *conditio humana* that cross-generational readers can relate to.

All of this sketches a comprehensive picture of the qualities of the entire genre. However, newspaper comic strips are a self-contained art form. The genre does not only serve to offer the reader enjoyment and a thoughtful insight into an age: Due to their hybridity and their appeal to children, comic strips are a useful medium in a pedagogical context. Today, the classroom is more multimedia-based than ever, and teachers are including new media such as film, internet, comic books, etc. In that respect, students can also benefit from newspaper comic strips, espe-

cially in acquiring a second language. Three rather brief suggestions are offered to show how the entire genre of newspaper comic strips can serve a practical benefit in language acquisition. As they are only rather short and superficial, a more detailed research of their pedagogical quality is desirable.

There are different types of learners (traditionally, learners are grouped in different types – the visual, auditive, haptic, and cognitive learner), and, as a hybrid form, comics in general are an ideal form to support students in language acquisition. Their visual side supports the reading comprehension on a visual level because it does not require any language proficiency; it enables students to read the images without any precognition. At the same time, in today's visual culture, young children and adolescents are confronted with an overwhelming presence of images: in magazines, television, advertisement, but also in social media. Reading images, i.e. acquiring a competence of how images work and are capable of manipulating the brain, is an essential tool for a reasonable handling of today's world.

Secondly, comics use text differently than prose. Comics depend primarily on spoken language, and as language acquisition depends on direct speech, comics are close to the original use of language. However, reading comic strips does not only mean reading spoken language. Particularly short newspaper comic strips as short narrative entities can help enhance students' writing abilities by challenging them to shift comics into a prose narrative. The speech balloons serve as an aid to form the sentences and to practice the use of reported speech. Comics can also be used for the three-dimensional description of pictures, and students can branch out into the field of art by describing and analyzing the images concerning their use of color and technique.

Last but not least, students can also gain access to narrative theory by creating their own comic strips. This will help the students to reflect on the mechanisms of storytelling in comic strips. Kathryn Comer did that with her students with stunning results, which she presents in her article "Illustrating Praxis: Comic Composition, Narrative Rhetoric, and Critical Multiliteracies." Her study reveals how comics enable students to gain access to narrative techniques by becoming storytellers themselves.

In that respect, newspaper comic strips are not only daily entertainment or an expensive gimmick for a newspaper. When done well, they

can be amazing artworks, humorously ponder life, and reflect upon current shifts and changes in society. They are avant-garde as they are an experimental art form rooted in daily life; Bill Watterson uses a creative medium to find a new approach to discuss social issues. They can offer fantastical worlds to readers, they can make them think, laugh, cry – and moreover, they can serve pedagogical purposes. However, little research has been done on the genre and on *Calvin and Hobbes* in particular – so to put it in the words of the very last Calvin and Hobbes comic strip published in December 1995 (*Magical* 165): “Let’s go exploring!”



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KATZMARZIK

Comic Art and Avant-Garde

This study explores the genre of newspaper comic strips through the lens of *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson. Published between 1985 and 1995, the series was translated into over thirty languages and continues its road of success around the world. Watterson's popularly acclaimed series demonstrates his artistic intention for the genre of newspaper comics to go beyond light entertainment. In his short comic strips, he creates pieces of art which address universal concerns in a humorous way.

The examination of Watterson's comics is based on the historic evolution of newspaper comic strips and the general conventions of underlying artistic narrative and visual techniques in graphic representations. In *Calvin and Hobbes*, the comic strip artist makes use of these conventions but also transcends them to sketch a world in which postmodern ideas are reflected and parodied.

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